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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION,
LABOR, AND PENSIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6300

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February 27, 2020

President Donald J. Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Trump:

I write with great concern about your selection of Vice President Mike Pence to lead the federal government's response to the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19). You were personally critical of President Obama's choice to lead the government's Ebola response given the individual's "zero experience in the medical area and zero experience in infectious disease control," calling him "A total joke!"¹ It is difficult to understand what you believe qualifies Vice President Pence to serve in this role, given not only his lack of public health experience but also his record of putting ideology over science and public health and allowing an infectious disease outbreak to spin out of control as Governor of Indiana. While it is important for the federal government to centralize decision-making and to communicate in a clear and timely way, we urge you to heed your own advice and let public health leaders with experience in infectious disease control lead the country's coronavirus response.

Vice President Pence oversaw one of the largest HIV outbreaks in the United States in recent decades and the largest HIV outbreak in Indiana's history.² In early 2015, local health officials in Scott County began to report HIV cases, which they linked to intravenous opioid use.³ The community already suffered from a lack of access to care, after their Planned Parenthood clinic – the county's only HIV testing center – closed in 2013.⁴ As the outbreak reached its peak, there were 20 new cases of HIV being diagnosed each week with nearly 220 people infected before the outbreak was curbed.⁵ Ninety-five of those diagnosed with HIV had also contracted hepatitis C (HCV).

It took then-Governor Pence more than two months to approve commonsense public health measures to address the crisis. Despite CDC advice that needle exchange programs, also known

¹ <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/523237015329193984>

² [https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/04/28/indiana-hiv-outbreak/26498117/;](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/04/28/indiana-hiv-outbreak/26498117/)

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/03/26/indiana-is-battling-the-worst-hiv-epidemic-in-state-history/>

³ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mike-pence-indiana-hiv_n_57f53b9be4b002a7312022ef

⁴ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jerome-adams-surgeon-general-opioid-addiction-hiv_n_59565cbfe4b02734df31d2e8

⁵ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jerome-adams-surgeon-general-opioid-addiction-hiv_n_59565cbfe4b02734df31d2e8

as syringe services programs, reduce HIV and HCV infections and are “an effective component of comprehensive community-based prevention and intervention programs,” then-Governor Pence was morally opposed to such programs.⁶ Though he faced pressure from local, state, and federal health officials, then-Governor Pence refused to change his mind.⁷ Surgeon General Jerome Adams, who was then the Indiana State Health Commissioner, shared then-Governor Pence’s reservations, saying, “There are people who have real moral and ethical concerns about passing out needles to people with substance abuse problems... To be honest, I shared that sentiment.”⁸

Two months into the outbreak, state health officials and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) experts met with then-Governor Pence to communicate the HIV outbreak had become an epidemic and to strongly advise that a needle exchange program was necessary.⁹ The meeting concluded without a decision from then-Governor Pence.¹⁰ Several days later, then-Governor Pence finally issued an Executive Order that allowed for a temporary needle exchange program, if requested by local officials in Scott County.¹¹ The exchange went into effect nine days later and was only available to Scott County residents.¹²

The months of inaction led to costly results: the CDC estimated that lifetime treatment costs for all of the people infected could reach \$100 million.¹³ Public health experts also concluded a swifter response by state officials, including implementation of a needle exchange program, could have decreased the HIV incidence by 90 percent.¹⁴

Vice President Pence’s leadership failure during the Indiana HIV outbreak is reason enough to question his ability to lead the federal government’s response to coronavirus at this time. But Vice President Pence has also spent decades advocating for policies that limit access to health care and exacerbate existing barriers to care. Vice President Pence has led efforts to sabotage the health care system and repeal the Affordable Care Act, led a crusade against Planned Parenthood and the historically bipartisan Title X family planning program, and advocated for regulations and policies to strip civil rights protections for LGBTQ patients.¹⁵ He has spread

⁶ <https://www.cdc.gov/ssp/syringe-services-programs-factsheet.html>;

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/08/us/politics/mike-pence-needle-exchanges-indiana.html? r=0>

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/08/us/politics/mike-pence-needle-exchanges-indiana.html? r=0>

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/08/us/politics/mike-pence-needle-exchanges-indiana.html? r=0>

⁹ <https://calendar.in.gov/site/isdh/event/needle-exchange-for-scott-county-only-now-in-effect/>;

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/08/us/politics/mike-pence-needle-exchanges-indiana.html? r=0>

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/08/us/politics/mike-pence-needle-exchanges-indiana.html? r=0>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/08/us/politics/mike-pence-needle-exchanges-indiana.html? r=0>;

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/27/us/indiana-declares-health-emergency-after-hiv-outbreak.html>

¹² <https://calendar.in.gov/site/isdh/event/needle-exchange-for-scott-county-only-now-in-effect/>

¹³ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/02/16/801720966/5-years-after-indianas-historic-hiv-outbreak-many-rural-places-remain-at-risk>

¹⁴ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/02/16/801720966/5-years-after-indianas-historic-hiv-outbreak-many-rural-places-remain-at-risk>; <https://news.yale.edu/2018/09/13/new-study-finds-hiv-outbreak-indiana-could-have-been-prevented>

¹⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-pence-hhs/>

misinformation, stating “condoms are a very, very poor protection against sexually transmitted diseases,”¹⁶ and “smoking doesn’t kill.”¹⁷

At a time when science and public health considerations should be driving all decision-making and the public is looking to the federal government for clear, fact-based communications, it is clear that Vice President Pence is neither a responsible nor a reliable selection to lead the coronavirus response. I strongly urge you to reconsider this appointment.

Sincerely,



PATTY MURRAY

Ranking Member

Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

¹⁶ <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/andrewkaczynski/mike-pence-in-2002-condoms-are-a-very-very-poor-protection-a>

¹⁷ <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/10/4/13164074/mike-pence-smoking-tobacco>