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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION,
LABOR, AND PENSIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6300

March 12, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pence
Vice President of the United States
The White House
Office of the Vice President
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Vice President Pence:

As the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) reaches pandemic levels, people in Washington state and across the country still face significant uncertainty about when and how to get tested if they are sick. It is unconscionable that months after this outbreak began, we are unable to provide clear, consistent information about testing capability for COVID-19, and my frustration with the federal government response on testing grows by the day. I call on you to appoint a qualified public health expert to join the federal government response team, whose sole responsibility will be to understand the status of testing, resolve issues related to testing, and communicate with federal, state, and local officials, as well as other stakeholders, about next steps. Additionally, I request that individual provide daily updates to Congress and to the public about testing capacity and any challenges arising through the testing process.

The Administration has failed several times to take steps that could expedite the COVID-19 response, resulting in a slower deployment of tests to people in need. In February, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) developed its own test that only six state laboratories across the country were able to verify.¹ By the end of February, CDC was still unable to scale up testing to meet demand.² Once some laboratories began producing their own tests, it remained unclear how many tests were available and whether they were being sent to areas in need. On March 10 – as we reached 1,000 cases in the United States – Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar said, “we don’t know exactly how many” patients have been tested for COVID-19.³ He added they were still working to get a reporting system in place, with the hopes of doing so this week. The same day, CDC Director Robert Redfield said U.S. labs may not have an adequate stock of supplies used to obtain results from a patient’s sample, which could further delay reporting and therefore delay response efforts.⁴

We are also learning from press reports that public health officials and researchers attempted to sound the alarm as COVID-19 outbreaks grew in other countries and we saw the first COVID-19

¹ <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/02/20/cdc-coronavirus-116529>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2020/02/24/world/asia/24reuters-china-health-usa-testing.html>

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/10/politics/alex-azar-americans-tested-for-coronavirus-cnnv/index.html>

⁴ <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/10/coronavirus-testing-lab-materials-shortage-125212>

cases in the United States. University of Washington researchers working on the Seattle Flu Study attempted to mobilize their network of research laboratories to deploy a test for COVID-19, but they ran into barriers with CDC, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and state regulators.⁵ While I am fully supportive of regulations that protect public health, we need to use every opportunity to think innovatively about ways to leverage existing resources in the COVID-19 response. I also remain troubled that public health experts such as those at the University of Washington recognized the threat posed by this infectious disease and were spurred to action, while our federal officials failed to take decisive action and struggled to send a unified message to the public in response.⁶

The continued challenges across every part of the testing regime – from development to deployment to communication – undermine my confidence in the federal government’s ability to effectively manage this vital aspect of the response moving forward. By appointing a qualified public health expert to oversee all issues related to testing, the federal government could more effectively meet the needs of people in my home state and across the country. I call on you to take this commonsense step immediately.

Sincerely,



PATTY MURRAY

United States Senator

Ranking Member, Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/us/coronavirus-testing-delays.html?action=click&module=Spotlight&pgtype=Homepage>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/07/us/politics/trump-coronavirus.html>