

MICHAEL B. ENZI, WYOMING  
RICHARD BURR, NORTH CAROLINA  
RAND PAUL, KENTUCKY  
SUSAN M. COLLINS, MAINE  
BILL CASSIDY, M.D., LOUISIANA  
PAT ROBERTS, KANSAS  
LISA MURKOWSKI, ALASKA  
TIM SCOTT, SOUTH CAROLINA  
MITT ROMNEY, UTAH  
MIKE BRAUN, INDIANA  
KELLY LOEFFLER, GEORGIA

PATTY MURRAY, WASHINGTON  
BERNARD SANDERS (I), VERMONT  
ROBERT P. CASEY, JR., PENNSYLVANIA  
TAMMY BALDWIN, WISCONSIN  
CHRISTOPHER S. MURPHY, CONNECTICUT  
ELIZABETH WARREN, MASSACHUSETTS  
TIM KAINE, VIRGINIA  
MARGARET WOOD HASSAN, NEW HAMPSHIRE  
TINA SMITH, MINNESOTA  
DOUG JONES, ALABAMA  
JACKY ROSEN, NEVADA

# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION,  
LABOR, AND PENSIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6300

DAVID P. CLEARY, STAFF DIRECTOR  
EVAN SCHATZ, DEMOCRATIC STAFF DIRECTOR

<http://help.senate.gov>

May 4, 2020

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20201

The Honorable Eugene Scalia  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Labor  
200 Constitution Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20210

Dear Secretaries Azar and Scalia:

I write to inquire into efforts of the Department of Labor (DOL) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to collaborate and coordinate on potential mechanisms to shift unemployed workers from across the country into an expanded public health workforce focused on containing and managing the spread of COVID-19. Public health experts agree that as part of a comprehensive strategy to safely reopen the country, we must implement a nationwide program to identify, trace, and isolate cases of COVID-19. This public health strategy will require the recruitment, training, and deployment of potentially hundreds of thousands of new public health workers across the country. As tens of millions of U.S. workers continue to lose their jobs during this public health crisis, I encourage your Departments to work together to mobilize the nation's growing number of unemployed workers to help fill this critical, yet unprecedented, public health workforce.

For the week ending April 11, DOL's Office of Unemployment Insurance reported a staggering 16 million people filed for unemployment benefits and an 11 percent insured unemployment rate, which the agency said "marks the highest level" of these data in history.<sup>1</sup> A *New York Times* analysis suggests the numbers are significantly higher when factoring in "a steep drop in hiring" and independent contractors who do not qualify for unemployment insurance benefits.<sup>2</sup> The *Times* estimates the nation's unemployment rate may be closer to "13 percent and rising at a speed unmatched in American history."<sup>3</sup> On April 26, White House economic adviser Kevin Hassett told reporters he expects the unemployment rate will rise to "around 16 percent or even

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dol.gov/ui/data.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/upshot/coronavirus-jobless-rate-great-depression.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/upshot/coronavirus-jobless-rate-great-depression.html>

higher” by the end of April.<sup>4</sup> As of April 30, DOL reports over 30 million people in this country had lost their jobs.<sup>5</sup> Even health care workers have been furloughed or laid off as hospitals and health care facilities have lost revenue from being forced to delay or cancel elective procedures to prepare to receive COVID-19 patients and to contain the spread of the virus—including health care workers in the nation’s hotspot areas desperate for help.<sup>6</sup>

While millions of workers across the country, including trained health care workers, are eager to get back to work, experts agree that to mitigate the spread of the virus and reopen the country, we will need to implement a massive case identification and contact tracing program powered by a new public health workforce of hundreds of thousands of people.<sup>7</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Robert Redfield has said that an aggressive containment program, consisting of “early case identification, isolation and contact tracing” and that will require an expansive public health workforce, will be the “centerpiece of our response.”<sup>8</sup> On April 10, Redfield promised a plan in the near future for the federal government to assist state, local, territorial, and tribal public health departments in establishing and expanding a contact tracing workforce.<sup>9</sup>

In an April 27 letter, bipartisan public health leaders stated, “[t]he existing public health system is currently capable of providing only a fraction of the contact tracing and voluntary self-isolation capacity required to meet the COVID-19 challenge.”<sup>10</sup> An effective containment strategy would thus require an expanded public health workforce of between 100,000 and 300,000 workers across the country.<sup>11</sup> To date, however, CDC has deployed only 1,250 health workers to state health departments to assist with testing and contact tracing and help develop a “strongly enhanced public health workforce,” and the agency’s reported efforts to tap into thousands of additional workers from federal programs like the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps have not materialized.<sup>12</sup>

The federal government should be exploring ways to address critical public health needs by shifting hundreds of thousands of unemployed workers into an expanded public health workforce. To help us understand the state of such an effort, we request answers to the following questions no later than May 18, 2020:

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2020/04/26/business/26reuters-health-coronavirus-usa-economy.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/30/us-weekly-jobless-claims.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/us/politics/coronavirus-health-care-workers-layoffs.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.vox.com/2020/4/24/21234762/apple-google-contact-tracing-coronavirus-lockdown>;

<https://hub.jhu.edu/2020/04/24/contact-tracing-crystal-watson/>;

<https://apps.npr.org/documents/document.html?id=6877567-Bipartisan-Public-Health-Leaders-Letter-on>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/04/21/840539685/cdc-to-fund-650-health-experts-to-help-states-trace-stop-covid-19>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/04/10/831200054/cdc-director-very-aggressive-contact-tracing-needed-for-u-s-to-return-to-normal>

<sup>10</sup> <https://apps.npr.org/documents/document.html?id=6877567-Bipartisan-Public-Health-Leaders-Letter-on>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.vox.com/2020/4/24/21234762/apple-google-contact-tracing-coronavirus-lockdown>;

<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/04/28/846736937/we-asked-all-50-states-about-their-contact-tracing-capacity-heres-what-we-learned>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/04/21/840539685/cdc-to-fund-650-health-experts-to-help-states-trace-stop-covid-19>

1. What efforts have been made by either of your Departments to identify mechanisms to shift currently unemployed workers to serve in public health roles to identify, trace, and isolate cases of COVID-19?
  - a. How are these efforts accounting for the safety and health of any workers deployed in the public health response?
  - b. How are these efforts focused on addressing the needs of low-income workers or workers in rural and frontier areas with limited employment opportunities?
  - c. How are these efforts focused on targeting public health efforts to identify, trace, and isolate cases of COVID-19 in areas of need, including medically underserved areas and health professional shortage areas?
2. Have you communicated or consulted with state, local, tribal, and territorial officials, including employment and public health officials, regarding opportunities to shift unemployed workers to an expanded public health workforce to contain and manage COVID-19?
3. Have you communicated or consulted with non-governmental entities or individuals regarding opportunities to shift unemployed workers to an expanded public health workforce to contain and manage COVID-19, including but not limited to public health experts, industry representatives, trade associations, unions, and worker advocates?
4. On April 10, CDC Director Redfield stated the nation needs an “army” of health care workers to implement a “very aggressive” containment strategy for COVID-19, and reported the CDC was “far along in [the] planning processes.” What is the status of this planning process? How are the agency’s plans being communicated to relevant stakeholders?
5. As hospitals and health care facilities have had to delay or cancel elective procedures to contain the spread of COVID-19, health care workers across the country have experienced furloughs, cuts in pay or benefits, and even job loss. How are your Departments working to shift these health care workers into areas of greatest need?

Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter. If you have any questions, or would like to further discuss compliance with this request, please contact Kathleen Borschow with my Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee Staff at 202-224-0767.

Sincerely,



PATTY MURRAY ·

United States Senator

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