

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 28, 2017

The Honorable Thomas E. Price, M.D.
Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue S.W.
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Price:

We write regarding your decision to repeatedly charter private planes for your official travel, leaving taxpayers to foot the bill. This decision is particularly shocking as you serve in an administration that routinely calls for draconian spending cuts and a reduction in government waste, and you yourself have repeatedly advocated for fiscal restraint. It is therefore especially difficult to understand the use of taxpayer funds for your luxury travel. The public deserves answers on how you and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS or the Department) justify these seemingly wasteful travel decisions, as well as detailed information on the costs and process associated with this travel.

According to recent press reports, you have chartered private planes for official travel for at least 26 separate flights.¹ You took private planes to easily accessible cities, when there were multiple options on commercial airlines at nearly the same times as your chartered flights. You also took private planes to the Aspen Ideas Festival, to a Maine resort for an event with a health care industry CEO, and to locations where you own property. The latest reports estimate that the cost of your official travel on private planes amounts to at least \$400,000.

HHS has confirmed that the money used to fund these chartered planes came out of the Department's budget.² According to White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, your charter travel "wasn't approved" by the White House.³ HHS Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Charmaine Yoeast defended the travel decisions, stating that a schedule of 13-plus-hour days means "commercial travel is not always feasible." She said HHS legal counsel reviewed the request for a private plane and cited your "packed tight" schedule with "no room for error" and "security concerns" to justify the flights.

Your willingness to spend hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars on your own travel comforts raises serious questions, particularly given your career-long campaign against what you consider excessive government spending. You have supported significant cuts to critically important programs like the Affordable Care Act (ACA), Medicare, Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), as well as biomedical research and preventive health efforts. In a speech on the House Floor in 2005, you declared, "America's checkbook is being used and

¹ <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/21/tom-price-private-charter-plane-flights-242989>;

<http://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/19/tom-price-chartered-planes-flights-242908>;

<http://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/26/tom-price-private-jets-243176>

² <http://www.cnn.com/2017/09/20/politics/tom-price-health-and-human-services-secretary-private-jets-report/index.html>

³ <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/25/tom-price-charter-plane-travel-white-house-response-243112>

abused every minute of every day, and this is more than annoying to taxpayers. It is an insult.”⁴ You went on to say, “It is important to remember that our government of the people, for the people is paid for by the people. It is time to stop wasting the people’s money.”⁵ In a CNBC interview in 2009, you called the use of private jets by Congress “another example of fiscal irresponsibility run amok in Congress right now.”⁶ In a speech at HHS earlier this year, you spoke about “the fiscal situation that our country faces today and the budgetary constraints we have” while introducing an initiative to reorganize the Department.⁷

You serve in an administration that has also consistently decried excessive government spending and has called for drastic cuts to critical, life-saving health programs. The President’s FY2018 proposed budget, which you testified in support of, called for a \$16.2 billion reduction in the HHS budget, including nearly \$6 billion in cuts to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), a 31 percent cut to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and a 17 percent cut to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).⁸ The Administration also proposed \$616 billion cuts to Medicaid and CHIP over ten years.

Furthermore, records show that you spent taxpayer dollars to take private planes to community health centers, while those very health centers – which serve about 27 million people – face a funding cliff for programs that provide more than 70% of their federal funds. These programs – the Community Health Center Fund, National Health Service Corps, and Teaching Health Center Graduate Medical Education – expire on September 30. Negotiations over funding for the CHIP program, which provides health insurance for nearly nine million children, are also on hold.

The Administration’s priorities could not be clearer. Administration officials travel to resorts and nearby cities on private planes while patients and families worry about access to the health care programs they rely on to survive. To assist us in understanding the use of taxpayer dollars to fund your travel during your tenure as Secretary, please respond to the following questions and document requests no later than October 12, 2017:

1. Please provide all documents related to each flight for which you hired a private jet or charter plane during your tenure as Secretary, including, but not limited to invoices, receipts, and travel authorizations.
2. Please provide a list of each flight for which you hired a private jet or charter plane during your tenure as Secretary. For each flight, please also provide the following information:
 - a. The total cost of the flight;
 - b. The plane model;
 - c. A list of passengers on each flight; and
 - d. The justification for not flying commercially.

⁴ Congressional Record – House, March 15, 2005

⁵ Congressional Record – House, March 15, 2005

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3QX6DpvPNB0>


⁷ <http://www.healthcareitnews.com/news/tom-price-tell-hhs-reimagine-how-agency-works>


⁸ <http://www.cnn.com/2017/03/16/politics/trump-budget-cuts/index.html>; <http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/05/23/529654114/medical-research-health-care-face-deep-cuts-in-trump-budget>

3. For each trip taken during your tenure as Secretary, regardless of whether you flew commercially or on a private plane, please provide the purpose of the trip. If a trip was not purely for official purposes, please provide details of the other purposes of the trip.
4. Please provide an explanation for how each of your flights on privately chartered planes was consistent with the Federal Travel Regulations and the HHS Travel Policy Manual.
5. Press reports confirmed that the HHS legal counsel reviewed the requests for private planes. Please provide the reviews or analyses conducted by the HHS Office of the General Counsel for each flight for which you hired a private jet or charter plane.
6. Press reports indicate that travel by privately chartered plane "wasn't approved" by the White House. Please provide any communications with the White House regarding your travel, including reviews, analyses, or requests sent to or conducted by the White House.
7. According to Politico, "Eddie Moneypenny of Ultimate Jetcharters, who confirmed that his company's 30-seat jet was used for a Dulles-Philadelphia roundtrip last week, said he wasn't aware that the trip was for a government official and the charter had been booked through a third party."⁹ Please describe the process by which your official travel is booked, including when non-government employees are responsible for such arrangements and the circumstances under which such arrangements are determined appropriate.
8. Please provide a copy of any and all communications to or from HHS personnel related to travel, meals, and accommodations for the Secretary.
9. During your tenure as Secretary, are there any occasions on which HHS employees other than yourself took privately chartered planes for official travel? If so, please provide all documents related to each flight for which an HHS employee other than yourself used a private jet or charter plane for official travel during your tenure as Secretary, including, but not limited to invoices, receipts, and travel authorizations.

Thank you in advance for your prompt attention to this critical matter. If you have any questions, or would like to further discuss compliance with this request, please contact Elizabeth Letter (202-224-6403) with Senator Murray's HELP Committee staff or Peter Gartrell (202-224-4515) with Senator Wyden's Finance Committee staff.

Sincerely,


PATTY MURRAY
Ranking Member
Senate HELP Committee


RON WYDEN
Ranking Member
Senate Finance Committee

⁹ <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/19/tom-price-chartered-planes-flights-242908>



THOMAS R. CARPER
United States Senator




SHERROD BROWN
United States Senator



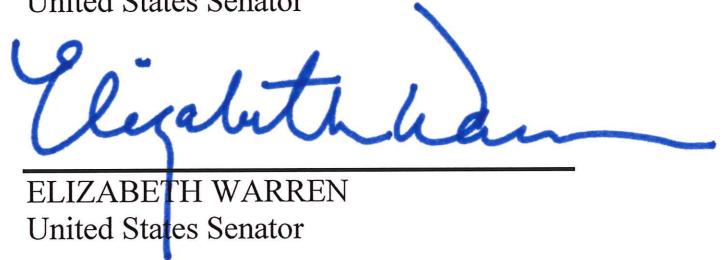
SHELDON WHITEHOUSE
United States Senator



AL FRANKEN
United States Senator



TAMMY BALDWIN
United States Senator



ELIZABETH WARREN
United States Senator



MARGARET WOOD HASSAN
United States Senator