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U.S. House of Representatives

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February 27, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Azar,

Following up on the questions asked at today's Committee on Ways and Means (Committee) hearing, we would like a complete, immediate response to the serious concerns that have been raised about potentially dangerous management of the coronavirus. In particular, we would like a response to the allegations that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) used human services staff without proper training or equipment to interact directly with individuals exposed to coronavirus in quarantined areas, and the possibility that management decisions at HHS could have contributed to the spread of the virus within the United States.

In yesterday's national address, the President said "Because of all we've done, the risk to the American people remains very low." But the reports we have received of mismanagement and disregard of long-standing principles for managing public health outbreaks suggest just the opposite. We are deeply troubled that HHS seems to have ignored valid public health concerns, and also about reports that HHS immediately retaliated against a whistleblower instead of taking action to protect its staff and the public from being exposed to a potentially fatal virus. A whistleblower complaint about use of the Repatriation Program is a case in point.

We were alarmed to learn from a whistleblower that HHS deployed human services workers, including staff from the U.S. Repatriation Program within our Committee's jurisdiction—to interact with Americans evacuated because of coronavirus outbreaks. The whistleblower alleges that staff were sent into quarantined areas "without personal protective equipment, training, or experience in managing public health emergencies, safety protocols, and the potential danger to both themselves and members of the public they come into contact with."

The whistleblower also reported that when staff raised safety concerns, they were “admonished by [redacted] for ‘decreasing staff morale,’ accused of not being team players, and had their mental health and emotional stability questioned.”

We believe these potentially-exposed HHS employees have subsequently been interacting with the public, including taking commercial air flights and returning home to their families, without being tested for coronavirus or taking any other precautions. We do not have any information on whether these staff are being monitored for exposure to the virus, or whether HHS continues to put staff and the public at risk through inappropriate actions relating to quarantined individuals who may have coronavirus.

The purpose of the program is to provide temporary assistance to U.S. citizens and their dependents who have been identified by the U.S. Department of State as in need of repatriation from a foreign country. The program receives very modest annual funding of \$1 million a year, and, with Congressional authorization, has sometimes received additional funding to respond to the human services needs associated with mass repatriation due to war or natural disaster. Based on the traditional role the Repatriation Program serves, there was no reason to believe that staff or managers in this program would have any training to mitigate their risk of infection or to prevent the spread of an infectious disease or would even fully understand the risks involved with coronavirus, for them and the public.

We also have serious questions about the Administration’s request for an additional \$9 million in spending for the Repatriation Program included in the supplemental funding request.¹ We would like a detailed briefing of how the Administration plans to use this funding and whether this funding could be used for staff to serve in the capacities described by the whistleblower. If so, this would expand the dangerous use of non-public health staff to respond to a public health crisis. Our staff previously requested more information about your plans to increase Repatriation Program involvement in the coronavirus response; we would like to receive that information, along with information about your plans to test exposed employees for coronavirus, to track the potential spread of the disease, and to prevent additional exposure due to mismanagement.

We respectfully request that you brief the Committee within one week. Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

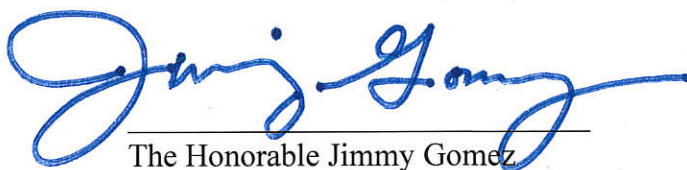
¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Coronavirus-Supplemental-Request-Letter-Final.pdf>.

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Sincerely,



The Honorable Richard E. Neal
Chairman



The Honorable Jimmy Gomez

cc:

Lynn Johnson, Assistant Secretary, Administration for Children & Families, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services

Robert R. Redfield, Director, Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services