

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 20, 2020

Vice President Michael Pence
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20050

Alex M. Azar
Secretary
Department of Health and Human
Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

Robert R. Redfield, M.D.
Director
Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30329

Dear Vice President Pence, Secretary Azar, and Director Redfield:

We write to urge the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to develop and publicly release a nationwide plan on widespread testing for COVID-19 and contact tracing that will allow communities to move toward resuming social practices and reopening the economy. In addition to addressing the immediate health needs of our nation, HHS and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) must take a leadership role in planning public health approaches to identify and mitigate further the spread of the virus. Any forthcoming plan to reopen communities and businesses must be deliberate and data-driven.

On April 9, 2020, the CDC Director Robert Redfield told NPR that the CDC has been crafting a plan to scale back social distancing policies that includes increased testing and “very aggressive” contact tracing for people who test positive for COVID-19. Additionally, Director Redfield said nationwide contact tracing efforts would require a substantial scale-up of personnel. We request detailed information on the CDC’s strategy to prepare for and carry out increased nationwide contact tracing.

Contact tracing has been used for decades to limit the transmission of infectious diseases. It is the process of identifying and contacting individuals who recently interacted with infected people, and monitoring those individuals to identify potential for continued spread of disease. Those steps are repeated again for all contacts of the origin case that also test positive for the illness.

Governors across the country have issued strict statewide social distancing policies, which appear to be playing an important role in slowing the spread of COVID-19 in some areas. These policies are critically important to public health, but also incredibly disruptive to our economy and way of life. In order to begin to ease these stay-at-home measures for people without symptoms or recent exposure to a confirmed COVID-19 case, we must radically expand testing and our public health system must be prepared to dramatically scale up contact tracing efforts. In the current landscape of the pandemic, recommending the relaxation of social distancing policies without, at a minimum, a comprehensive testing and tracing plan—based in science—would risk further spreading the virus, jeopardizing the lives of millions of Americans.

Currently, the nation lacks an extensive testing and tracing infrastructure. According to the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, there are only 2,200 contact tracers across the United States as of April 10, 2020. A sweeping nationwide effort to implement contact tracing would necessitate hundreds of thousands of additional tracers. Before our nation can responsibly reopen, the federal government must swiftly support state and local health authorities to recruit, hire, and train a tracing workforce.

Additionally, while contact tracing is a reliable method of reducing the spread of the virus, we are concerned about your agency’s efforts to safeguard Americans’ privacy rights. Google and Apple, for example, have collaborated to enable Bluetooth technology to assist governments and health care agencies in their response to the pandemic. While we appreciate the private sector’s partnership and

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shared goal to keep Americans healthy, we want to ensure the use of personal data is used in a manner that protects and respects the privacy of our citizens.

We ask HHS to craft, release, and implement a plan that includes robust testing for the virus and expanded contact tracing immediately. We also request the following information from HHS about any current or forthcoming COVID-19 relief strategy that includes testing and contact tracing:

1. A detailed summary of resources needed to design and execute nationwide testing and contact tracing.
2. A comprehensive explanation of HHS's strategy and efforts to support states and localities in recruiting, hiring, and training a sufficient number of qualified contact tracers across the country, including efforts to recruit tracers with diverse language capabilities, as well as strategies to accommodate seniors and Americans with disabilities.
3. A thorough outline of HHS's plan to protect and secure the private data of Americans during all contact tracing efforts.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. To provide clarity on any plans HHS has or is crafting to bolster testing and contact tracing, we ask for a response by Thursday, April 30, 2020.

Sincerely,

/s/ Jeffrey A. Merkley
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

/s/ Sherrod Brown
Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

/s/ Jeanne Shaheen
Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

/s/ Edward J. Markey
Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

/s/ Elizabeth Warren
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

/s/ Christopher S. Murphy
Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator

/s/ Chris Van Hollen
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United States Senator

/s/ Mazie K. Hirono
Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator

/s/ Jack Reed
Jack Reed
United States Senator

/s/ Richard Blumenthal
Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

/s/ Tammy Baldwin
Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator