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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-4209

March 23, 2020

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COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION
IN EUROPE (U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)

White House Coronavirus Task Force
Vice President Mike Pence, Chairman
15 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Vice President Pence,

As the coronavirus (COVID-19) continues to spread within communities, too often going undetected, we write to seek answers as to why states have been and continue to be unable to access the necessary supplies to conduct tests approved by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The delay in access to accurate test kits has, and will continue to, come at the cost of human life.

The World Health Organization (WHO) released guidance on January 17, 2020 with instructions on how to manufacture COVID-19 tests. On the same day, Dr. Nancy Messonnier, Director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, claimed the CDC had a test prepared and the WHO guidance would not be used.¹ As you know, the White House Coronavirus Task Force was established on January 29, 2020.

¹ Arman Azad. CNN. "WHO and CDC never discussed providing international test kits to the US, global health agency says." <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/18/health/who-coronavirus-tests-cdc/index.html>.

The CDC's tests were distributed February 5, 2020. By February 6, 2020, the WHO shipped 250,000 tests to more than 70 international laboratories.² Nearly a month later, on March 1, 2020, the CDC announced its initial test was inoperable. The WHO guidance was again seemingly not consulted. Test kits were not available in all 50 states or Washington, D.C. until March 9, 2020.³ At this time, nearly 500 Americans have died from COVID-19.⁴

It is essential we understand how this occurred so that, as we work to flatten the curve of infection, fund vital medical research, provide hospitals with essential supplies and protect health care workers, we may operate with a full understanding of the Administration's decision-making process. Please provide responses to the following:

1. After the CDC's first test failed, was there consideration to incorporate the WHO's test guidance? If yes, what led to the decision to continue without incorporating guidance? If no, what was the calculation that a national delay in testing distribution was the best option?
2. Dr. Deborah Birx, White House's coronavirus response coordinator, indicated that the WHO's test was inaccurate. When clarifying she was referring to a different test, she said: "I assume it [the WHO test] is functional."⁵ Did any member of the Task Force consult the evidence of the accuracy of the WHO test before declining to incorporate it?
3. On Monday, March 16, 2020, the U.S. Air Force delivered 500,000 swabs for COVID-19 testing kits from Italy to Memphis, Tennessee for distribution.⁶ These swabs, along with viral transplant media, are essential components for COVID-19 testing. As more Americans require testing for COVID-19, what is the Administration doing to ensure medical facilities are fully-stocked, including partnering with other countries?
4. At what time does the Task Force anticipate test kits, personal protection equipment (including N95 masks, gloves, gowns), and hospital equipment (including ventilators and respirators) to be widely available?

² Peter Whoriskey and Neena Satija. *Washington Post*. "How U.S. coronavirus testing stalled: Flawed tests, red tape and resistance to using the millions of tests produced by the WHO." <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/03/16/cdc-who-coronavirus-tests/>.

³ Arman Azad. CNN. "WHO and CDC never discussed providing international test kits to the US, global health agency says." <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/18/health/who-coronavirus-tests-cdc/index.html>.

⁴ Madison Holcombe and Holly Yan. CNN. "US surgeon general warns 'this week, it's going to get bad' as hospitals struggle to keep up with new coronavirus cases." <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/23/health/us-coronavirus-updates-monday/index.html>.

⁵ Arman Azad. CNN. "WHO and CDC never discussed providing international test kits to the US, global health agency says." <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/18/health/who-coronavirus-tests-cdc/index.html>.

⁶ Marcus Weisgerber. *DefenseOne*. "US Air Force Flew Half a Million Coronavirus Test Swabs From Italy to Tennessee." <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2020/03/us-air-force-flew-half-million-coronavirus-test-kits-italy-tennessee/163879/>.

In uncertain times such as these, transparency must be our guide to swift and decisive action. Our health care professionals must have robust support to combat this virus. We appreciate your urgent attention to these matters.

Sincerely,



Steve Cohen
Member of Congress

/s/
Jesús G. “Chuy” García
Member of Congress

/s/
Jim Cooper
Member of Congress

/s/
Abigail D. Spanberger
Member of Congress

/s/
Grace F. Napolitano
Member of Congress

/s/
Ro Khanna
Member of Congress

/s/
Zoe Lofgren
Member of Congress

/s/
Deb Haaland
Member of Congress

/s/
Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress

/s/
Katie Porter
Member of Congress

/s/
Juan Vargas
Member of Congress

/s/
James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

/s/
Stephen Lynch
Member of Congress

/s/
Frederica S. Wilson
Member of Congress

/s/
Debbie Mucarsel-Powell
Member of Congress

/s/
Norma J. Torres
Member of Congress

/s/
Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress

/s/
Haley M. Stevens
Member of Congress

/s/
Joyce Beatty
Member of Congress

/s/
Ted Deutch
Member of Congress

/s/
Brad Sherman
Member of Congress

/s/
Matt Cartwright
Member of Congress

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John Yarmuth
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Alan Lowenthal
Member of Congress

/s/
John B. Larson
Member of Congress

/s/
Alcee L. Hastings
Member of Congress

/s/
Darren Soto
Member of Congress

/s/
Peter Welch
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/s/
Tony Cárdenas
Member of Congress

/s/
Mike Quigley
Member of Congress

/s/
Karen Bass
Member of Congress

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Debbie Wasserman
Schultz
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/s/
Peter A. DeFazio
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Colin Allred
Member of Congress

/s/
Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress

/s/
Harley Rouda
Member of Congress

/s/
Yvette D. Clarke
Member of Congress

/s/
Marcia L. Fudge
Member of Congress

/s/
Vicente Gonzalez
Member of Congress

/s/
Bobby L. Rush
Member of Congress

/s/
Terri A. Sewell
Member of Congress

/s/
Lois Frankel
Member of Congress

/s/
Henry C. “Hank” Johnson,
Jr.
Member of Congress

/s/
André Carson
Member of Congress