

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
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July 20, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Azar:

We write to express our growing concerns regarding the Trump Administration's continued actions to sideline public health officials who should be leading our nation's response to the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. On June 29, 2020, we sent you a letter expressing alarm at the repudiation of the scientific expertise of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and requested information to ensure scientific and public health expertise remained at the forefront of the nation's COVID-19 response.¹ You have not yet responded to our inquiry. In the subsequent weeks, there have been a series of troubling instances where you have failed, once again, to defend your own public health officials from the Trump Administration's attacks.

Our nation is at a critical juncture of the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring full and unbridled coordination across the federal government. The number of new daily cases continue to climb, with some states reaching record daily highs and COVID-19-related fatalities nationwide exceeding 139,000.² As the top health official in the country, you have a duty to protect the health and well-being of all Americans. Instead, you have spent the last six months promoting politics over science in our nation's COVID-19 pandemic response. It is time for you to either stand up to protect public health or step aside as the nation's top health official.

¹ Letter from Rep. Frank Pallone, Jr., Chairman, House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Rep. Diana DeGette, Chair, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, to Alex Azar, Secretary, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (June 29, 2020).

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Cases in the U.S.* (www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html) (accessed July 20, 2020).

Throughout the national public health emergency, you have failed to respond to the Administration's continued escalation of disputes with CDC—an operating division under your authority—including by allowing Trump Administration officials to repeatedly undermine key CDC public health guidance. Most recently, President Trump publicly condemned CDC's COVID-19 guidance for schools as “impractical” and “expensive.”³ Similarly, instead of presenting a plan to support school compliance with CDC's evidence-based guidance, Vice President Pence warned that it should not be a “barrier” to reopening schools and announced CDC would be issuing more guidance documents.⁴ Several days later, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany joined in to undermine CDC, stating during a press conference that “science should not stand in the way” of reopening schools.⁵

In a similarly flagrant dismissal of CDC's science-based guidance, at the end of June, Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Michael Caputo reportedly agreed with a senior HHS adviser who accused CDC of “undermining the President” by releasing a scientific report on COVID-19's potential risks to pregnant women.⁶ In a statement to the press regarding recent COVID-19 hospital reporting changes that entirely bypass CDC, Mr. Caputo again criticized CDC, stating that it “just cannot keep up with this pandemic.”⁷ You have failed to acknowledge or respond in any way to these blistering and indefensible condemnations.

Your repeated failure to uphold the scientific integrity of the federal COVID-19 response has prompted an outcry from leading public health officials around the country. Concerned by the unprecedented pattern of attacks on CDC by the Trump Administration, former CDC Directors Tom Frieden, Jeffrey Koplan, David Satcher, and former CDC Acting Director Richard Besser noted that “public health experts face two opponents: covid-19, but also political leaders and others attempting to undermine the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention...these repeated efforts to subvert sound public health guidelines introduce chaos and uncertainty while unnecessarily putting lives at risk.”⁸ In addition, nearly 350 public health

³ *White House Stumbles Over How Best to Reopen Schools, as Trump Blasts CDC Guidance*, NPR (July 8, 2020).

⁴ *Trump Threatens to Cut Funding for Schools, Slams CDC Reopening Guidelines as Too Tough and Expensive*, CNBC (July 8, 2020).

⁵ *‘Science should not stand in the way’ of schools reopening, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany says*, USA Today (July 16, 2020).

⁶ *CDC Feels Pressure from Trump as Rift Grows over Coronavirus Response*, Washington Post (July 9, 2020).

⁷ *Hospitals Told to Send Coronavirus Data to Washington, not CDC*, NBC News (July 15, 2020).

⁸ Friedan, Thomas et al., *We Ran the CDC. No President Ever Politicized its Science the Way Trump Has*, Washington Post (July 14, 2020).

organizations collaborated to implore you to affirm and defend CDC.⁹ We are gravely concerned that these warnings and pleas have become necessary.

While attacks against CDC are concerning on their own, the Trump Administration's attacks extend beyond CDC to individual public health leaders as well. Alarming, you have done nothing to protect your own staff when the health of the nation depends on their expertise now more than ever. Instead, you have allowed President Trump and other Administration officials to perpetually discredit HHS scientists. For example, Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institutes of Health's National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has been a frequent target of the Trump Administration, which recently renewed its efforts to criticize the decades-long public health civil servant. For instance, President Trump publicly denigrated Dr. Fauci earlier this month, remarking that Fauci "is a nice man, but he's made a lot of mistakes."¹⁰ These attacks appeared to escalate in the days following those comments, with the White House reportedly providing press with opposition research materials compiled about Dr. Fauci.¹¹ And, in an interview that aired just yesterday, President Trump doubled-down on his prior comment, stating, "Dr. Fauci has made some mistakes. ...He's a little bit of an alarmist."¹² Throughout the course of these attacks, you have remained silent.

Meanwhile, other Administration officials have piled on more criticisms, including your Assistant Secretary for Health, testing czar Admiral Brett Giroir, who said that Dr. Fauci is "not 100 percent right, and he also doesn't necessarily ... have the whole national interest in mind."¹³ Similarly, White House Trade Adviser Peter Navarro wrote an op-ed last week titled "Anthony Fauci has been wrong about everything I have interacted with him on."¹⁴ Medical experts and public health leaders have been vocal in their rebuttal of these smear tactics, touting Dr. Fauci's "unmatched expertise" and his "critical perspective that needs to be heard."¹⁵ As COVID-19 cases spread across the country, the Trump Administration's blatant attempts to scapegoat its

⁹ *Hundreds of Health Groups Petition Against Trump*, Politico (July 7, 2020).

¹⁰ *White House Takes Aim at Fauci but Trump has No Current Plans to Fire Him, Source Says*, CNN (July 13, 2020).

¹¹ *'Everyone is Lying': Trump Questions Public Health Experts on Twitter*, Politico (July 13, 2020); *White House Effort to Undermine Fauci is Criticized by Public Health Experts, Scientists and Democrats*, Washington Post (July 13, 2020).

¹² *Trump says his relationship with 'alarmist' Fauci is 'very good,'* Politico (July 19, 2020).

¹³ *'Everyone is Lying': Trump Questions Public Health Experts on Twitter*, Politico (July 13, 2020).

¹⁴ Navarro, Peter, *Anthony Fauci has Been Wrong About Everything I Have Interacted with Him On*, USA TODAY (July 14, 2020).

¹⁵ *White House Effort to Undermine Fauci is Criticized by Public Health Experts, Scientists and Democrats*, Washington Post (July 13, 2020).

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II

July 20, 2020

Page 4

own scientists as political cover for its botched pandemic response is reprehensible and dangerous.

These examples are merely the latest in a series of instances where you have remained silent as the Trump Administration has launched unfounded attacks on the scientific expertise of HHS. Your lack of leadership demonstrates a dangerous disregard for scientific expertise and an abdication of your responsibilities, jeopardizing the health and safety of all Americans by undermining our nation's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The nation, your department, and its public health experts need the leadership you swore to provide as Secretary of HHS. The time is past due to uphold your commitment to this oath.

Sincerely,



Frank Pallone, Jr.
Chairman



Diana DeGette
Chair
Subcommittee on Oversight
and Investigations