

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS  
**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE  
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WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115

Majority (202) 225-2927  
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September 24, 2020

The Honorable Christi A. Grimm  
Principal Deputy Inspector General  
Office of Inspector General  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
330 Independence Avenue, Southwest  
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Ms. Grimm:

We write to request the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Inspector General (OIG) open an investigation into recent reports that the White House and political appointees in the Trump Administration have interfered in the scientific work of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) employees tasked with the public health response to the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

The Trump Administration has politicized public health throughout the COVID-19 pandemic response. For instance, the President has claimed that Food and Drug Administration (FDA) officials are “the deep state,”<sup>1</sup> and belittled or contradicted CDC and National Institutes of Health (NIH) leaders, like Dr. Nancy Messonnier<sup>2</sup> and Dr. Anthony Fauci.<sup>3</sup> These reports raise serious questions about the Administration’s ability and commitment to rely upon established science and to allow science to guide HHS’s and our nation’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

CDC is the nation’s premier public health agency. Yet, the appearance of political interference in the agency’s scientific work has led to at best mixed messages, and at worse the loss of public trust in the Agency’s public guidance. While the nation grapples with the worst

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<sup>1</sup> *Trump says without proof that FDA 'deep state' slowing COVID trials*, Reuters (Aug. 22, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> *Trump’s strange claim about his CDC director being ‘misquoted’ reinforces his coronavirus alternate reality*, Washington Post (April 23, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> *Trump versus the doctors: When the president and his experts contradict each other*, ABC News (April 24, 2020).

health crisis in a generation, transparency around the decision-making process and COVID-19 response efforts from CDC's leadership is crucial to assuring the American people that COVID-19 guidance is based on only established medical and scientific research.

The Committee has repeatedly raised alarm over the sidelining of CDC, its public health experts, and the politicization of science in the Trump Administration's COVID-19 pandemic response in hearings and in letters to Secretary Azar since June.<sup>4, 5, 6, 7</sup> Neither Secretary Azar nor Director Redfield has taken substantive action to depoliticize the COVID-19 pandemic response efforts. A number of troubling reports in the past month have further provided the appearance of political interference with CDC policies and public guidelines.

- On August 24, without any apparent scientific explanation, CDC quietly modified its coronavirus testing guidelines to say that people who have been in close contact with an infected individual “do not necessarily need a test” if they do not have symptoms.<sup>8</sup> Previous CDC COVID-19 testing guidelines recommended that all close contacts of people infected, or suspected of being infected, with the coronavirus, regardless of symptoms, should be tested for the coronavirus. This revision followed calls by President Trump to slow down testing.<sup>9</sup> On September 18, following outcry from public health experts nationwide,<sup>10</sup> CDC reversed its testing guidelines regarding asymptomatic testing.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Letter from Rep. Frank Pallone, Jr., Chairman, Rep. Anna G. Eshoo, Chairwoman, and Rep. Diana DeGette, Chair, House Committee on Energy and Commerce, to Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Stephen Hahn (Aug. 24, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Rep. Frank Pallone, Jr., Chairman, Rep. Diana DeGette, Chair, House Committee on Energy and Commerce, to Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Alex M. Azar II (July 20, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Sen. Patty Murray, Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, Rep. Frank Pallone, Jr., Chairman, House Committee on Energy and Commerce, to President Donald J. Trump (July 6, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Rep. Frank Pallone, Jr., Chairman, Rep. Diana DeGette, Chair, House Committee on Energy and Commerce, to Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Alex M. Azar II (June 29, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> *C.D.C. Changes Testing Guidance to Exclude People Without Covid-19 Symptoms, Worrying Experts*, New York Times (Aug 25, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> *Trump says he wasn't joking about testing slowdown: "I don't kid"*, CBS News (June 23, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Adventist Health et. al., to Vice President Mike Pence (Sept. 3, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> *C.D.C. Reverses Testing Guidelines for People Without Covid-19 Symptoms*, New York Times (Sept. 18, 2020).

- On September 2, CDC notified public health officials in all 50 states and five large cities to prepare to distribute a coronavirus vaccine to health care workers and other high-risk groups by November 1, raising concerns that vaccine approval and distribution is being driven by political consideration for the presidential election rather than data or information from late-stage clinical trials that would indicate vaccine readiness.<sup>12</sup> This comes as President Trump has repeatedly predicted a vaccine may be approved before the election.<sup>13</sup>
- On September 10, HHS political staff and Assistant Secretary for Public Health Michael Caputo and his aide, Dr. Paul Alexander, reportedly demanded to review and sought to make changes to CDC's scientific publication, the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Reports* (MMWR).<sup>14</sup> Mr. Caputo defended the MMWR interference, accused CDC staff of being part of "the deep state" and of "sedition," suggested that gun owners buy ammunition, and said that "the shooting will begin" when Trump refuses to stand down at the inauguration. Secretary Azar stated that Mr. Caputo "has been a valued member of our coronavirus response."<sup>15</sup> HHS has since announced that Mr. Caputo will be taking a medical leave of absence and that Dr. Alexander will be leaving the Department.<sup>16</sup>
- On September 16, Director Redfield testified before the Senate Appropriations Committee that, "At no time has the scientific integrity of the MMWR been compromised and I can say that under my watch it will not be compromised," and stated he was saddened that the false accusations were made about a group of "unbelievably professional people that serve this nation."<sup>17</sup> Following Director Redfield's comments that the availability of a COVID-19 vaccine for the general public would not come until mid-2021, and that masks may be more effective than a vaccine for certain individuals

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<sup>12</sup> *CDC Tells States: Be Ready to Distribute Vaccines on Nov. 1*, Associate Press (Sept. 2, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> *Trump reportedly wants to bypass health regulations to approve an experimental coronavirus vaccine before the election*, Business Insider (Aug. 24, 2020); *Trump contradicts health officials, says 'probably' a Covid-19 vaccine in October*, Politico (Sept. 4, 2020); *Trump pledges a Covid-19 vaccine by end of 2020 — without acknowledging the scientific uncertainty*, Stat News (Aug. 27, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> *Trump Officials Interfered with CDC Reports on Covid-19*, Politico (9/11/2020).

<sup>15</sup> *Top HHS official takes leave of absence after Facebook rant about CDC conspiracies*, NBC News (Sept. 16, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> *Health Official to Take Leave of Absence After He Attacked Federal Scientists*, New York Times (Sept. 16, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Senate Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies, Testimony of Robert R. Redfield, Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Hearing on Review of Coronavirus Response Efforts*, 116<sup>th</sup> Cong. (Sept. 16, 2020).

who do not have an immune response, the President used his press conference to declare that Redfield's remarks were a "mistake" and that "this is incorrect information."<sup>18</sup>

- On September 18, CDC posted online guidance that said airborne transmission was thought to be the main way the virus spreads.<sup>19</sup> On September 21, the guidance regarding airborne transmission was removed from the CDC site.<sup>20</sup> A banner now reads, "A draft version of proposed changes to these recommendations was posted in error to the agency's official website. CDC is currently updating its recommendations regarding airborne transmission of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19). Once this process has been completed, the update language will be posted."<sup>21</sup>
- On September 22, it was publicly reported that the office of Director Redfield directed an April 2020 memorandum detailing safety recommendations for a meat processing plant during COVID-19 be modified to suggest that the guidance outlined in the memorandum was only "if feasible" or "if possible" and noting that certain measures were only "recommended".<sup>22</sup>

To that end, we are calling for a full and thorough investigation of these reported events to determine whether and to what extent the White House, or its political appointees, have interfered with or politicized the scientific work of CDC during the COVID-19 response. As part of that work, we request HHS OIG examine the following questions:

1. Have any CDC career personnel raised concerns about interference from government officials outside CDC undermining CDC's mission or its public health response to COVID-19? If so, what were the nature of these concerns? Were those concerns addressed and if so, how? Please also examine whether HHS has sufficient programs, resources, and capabilities to fully and effectively receive and address such concerns reported by career staff.
2. Have White House personnel, including any political appointees, rejected, revised, discontinued, or dictated CDC COVID-19-related public health guidance, scientific

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<sup>18</sup> *Trump says CDC Director Robert Redfield 'confused' about coronavirus vaccine, mask efficacy. Redfield responded.*, USA Today (Sept. 16, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> *Updated CDC Guidance Acknowledges Coronavirus Can Spread through the Air*, CNN (Sept., 20, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> *CDC Publishes — Then Withdraws — Guidance On Aerosol Spread Of Coronavirus*, NPR (Sept. 21, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Coronavirus Disease: How It Spreads* ([www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html)) (accessed Sept. 22, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> *CDC director's office ordered softening of Covid safety protocols*, MSNBC (Sept. 22, 2020).

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publications, or data reporting platform, including MMWRs, testing guidelines, school or employer reopening guidelines, and hospital capacity reporting system? If so, on what basis were those actions taken, and did any improper outside influence affect those actions?

Americans must be able to trust that the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic is driven by science, not politics. Therefore, we appreciate your prompt and thorough review of these issues.

Sincerely,



Frank Pallone, Jr.  
Chairman



Anna G. Eshoo  
Chairwoman  
Subcommittee on Health



Diana DeGette  
Chair  
Subcommittee on Oversight  
and Investigations