

Opening Statement
Finance Committee Hearing
February 13, 2020

Good morning. This hearing will come to order.

I want to welcome our witness, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the Honorable Alex Azar.

I appreciate Secretary Azar appearing before the committee to discuss President Trump's budget for fiscal year 2021.

Secretary Azar oversees a sprawling department with programs that are crucial to the health and well-being of many Americans. The budget represents the Administration's recommended funding for those programs, as well as its key policy proposals.

While Congress decides funding levels and program changes, we have a duty to review the Administration's budget proposal. Secretary Azar is here to help us in that regard.

As with any budget submission, I disagree with a number of proposals. But I do want to speak to a few issues where it reflects my priorities.

Ranking Member Wyden and I have made lowering prescription drug prices a top priority. President Trump's focus on the issue has been a game-changer. Secretary Azar has been the point person for the Administration's efforts.

The Secretary has also helped greatly with our legislative effort. He and his team have provided guidance and technical assistance as we developed and refined the bipartisan bill the Committee reported out in July of last year.

I am pleased that the budget calls on Congress to quickly pass a bipartisan bill and includes a prescription drug placeholder for \$135 billion in reduced taxpayer subsidies to drug companies. I will ask the Secretary expand on this when we move to questions. For now, I will say that I look forward to continuing to work with the Secretary, the Ranking Member, and other Senators to provide relief to patients.

The budget also contains a number of proposals to improve health care in rural communities. Ensuring access to health care in Iowa and other rural areas has long been a priority for me. Ranking Member Wyden and I continue to discuss how to help rural and other underserved areas. The Administration's budget further bolsters our effort.

I'd like to also take a moment to highlight an effort to help HHS be more effective in executing its mission.

I understand that the HHS Office of National Security (ONS) is forging new ground with the Intelligence Community to leverage technology in innovative ways to better streamline intelligence operating procedures and to mitigate counterintelligence threats.

I encourage the Intelligence Community to provide even broader access to ONS, as it relates to its products and databases, to allow HHS to access vital information that it needs to mitigate threats to the Department, its funded partners, and its interagency colleagues.

As you are aware, via my oversight efforts, I've worked to make sure that ONS receives access to certain Intelligence Community related material and that you have gained access to some.

However, more work needs to be done. Recently, I sent two classified letters to Intelligence Community components to help bridge the gap between ONS and its IC counterparts.

As I've said before, the left hand and right hand must work together for the taxpayers.

I will conclude by noting that HHS has many important challenges. Some are long-standing, like the high cost of prescription drugs. Others appear with little notice, such as the novel coronavirus. While there is sure to be disagreement on many items in the budget. The issues I have highlighted are a reminder that we can work together in a bipartisan way to get things done for the American people.

I now recognize Ranking Member Wyden for his opening statement.