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February 28, 2020

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Azar,

As Ranking Member of the United States Senate Committee on Finance, I write with serious concern about the recent whistleblower report that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) deployed federal non-healthcare staff from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to two coronavirus quarantine sites in California. According to the whistleblower, deployed human services staff from the U.S. Repatriation Program, which is within the Committee's jurisdiction, were asked to interact directly with quarantined individuals without adequate procedures, safety protocols, training, or protective equipment. Such mismanagement on the part of HHS placed these human services staff at risk. Not only that, but the general public was also put at risk since your employees were then immediately returned to their communities and jobs at the Department post-deployment, by commercial air flights with no precautions. I am alarmed, also, by reports of how the whistleblower has been treated by the Department after reporting that top HHS leaders dismissed concerns from managers and affected employees regarding this issue.

The novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19), has become a global public health emergency and the Department's actions to address the emergency should reflect the severity of the situation. According to the Johns Hopkins Whiting School of Engineering, there are currently more than 80,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 worldwide, including 60 cases in the United States.

The information public health officials and medical experts have provided on COVID-19 is largely based on what is known about similar coronaviruses. COVID-19 is spread person-to-person, between people who have close contact with one another, through coughing or sneezing, or through contact with infected surfaces or objects. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), people are most contagious when they are exhibiting the most severe symptoms, but it is also possible that COVID-19 can spread before symptoms are shown.

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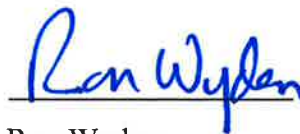
In order to prevent the spread of COVID-19, it is recommended that people who have traveled to affected areas or are experiencing symptoms (fever, cough, or shortness of breath) consult a health care provider and stay isolated as much as possible. The CDC recommends health care providers interview people with symptoms over telephone or videoconference to mitigate the potential spread of the virus. Given these recommendations, it is particularly concerning that ACF human services personnel, with limited or no public health or health care background, were sent into quarantine sites without guidance, training, or information.

With grave concern for the whistleblower and people within ACF and HHS who were potentially exposed, and given the fact that the virus' incubation period is anywhere from two to 14 days, please provide prompt and detailed answers to the following questions by March 6, 2020:

1. What are the Department's protocols for deploying medical and agency personnel to health emergency locations such as the quarantine centers established for repatriation of American citizens for COVID-19?
 - a. Did the Department follow these protocols for employees sent to March and Travis Air Force Bases?
 - b. How many HHS ACF employees were deployed to March and Travis Air Force Bases, respectively, and what dates were they deployed?
 - c. What specific skills and training did they have that justified their deployment?
 - d. Were HHS ACF employees deployed to any additional COVID-19 quarantine sites throughout the United States? If so, please identify those locations and provide the number of personnel deployed and the dates of their deployment.
 - e. Were HHS ACF employees given the option to conduct their assignments via teleconference or telephone, in line with CDC guidance for health care providers?
2. Did the Department deploy any other HHS personnel, including any personnel working in programs under the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response and the Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service, to coronavirus quarantine sites?
 - a. If so, list all teams deployed, purpose for their deployment, and dates and locations of deployment.
 - b. If so, what protocols did the Department follow to ensure the health and safety of HHS personnel?
 - c. If so, what specific skills and training did they have that justified their deployment?
3. What training, preparation, and protective gear did the Department provide deployed HHS ACF employees before they came into contact with quarantined individuals?
4. Describe and provide copies of any safety procedures or protocols that applied to HHS employees deployed to these locations.

5. Has the Department taken any steps to quarantine, monitor, or test HHS ACF employees post-deployment at the quarantine sites? If so, provide detailed description of these measures, including the procedures implemented and the dates and locations where these steps occurred. Specifically:
 - a. Were HHS ACF employees tested for COVID-19 before leaving quarantine sites and returning to their normal jobs with the Department?
 - b. Did HHS ACF employees travel domestically or internationally once they completed their work at the COVID-19 quarantine sites? If so, what protocol was in place to ensure that COVID-19 was not spread to the American public?
6. How are you ensuring all HHS employees potentially exposed to deployed employees who have returned to their normal jobs are tested for COVID-19?
7. How is HHS communicating to its employees the personal risk of exposure and protocol should an employee experience COVID-19 symptoms or become concerned they were exposed?
8. The whistleblower's attorney reported to the Washington Post "she was involuntarily assigned to a position in a subject matter where she has no expertise." Pursuant to the Whistleblower Protection Act, retaliation against a Federal employee who is a whistleblower is a prohibited personnel practice.
 - a. Describe in detail why the whistleblower was reassigned, including when and by whom.
 - b. Did you or any of your direct reports have knowledge of and/or approve this reassignment?
 - c. What has the Department done to ensure all appropriate procedures were taken with regard to protecting this employee pursuant to the Whistleblower Protection Act?

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
Ranking Member
Senate Finance Committee