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February 22, 2018

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

Dear Secretary Azar:

As the long-time lead sponsor of legislation authorizing funding for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to conduct gun safety and gun violence prevention research, I was heartened by your testimony last Thursday before the House Energy and Commerce Committee that the CDC would begin engaging on this critical issue.

As you recognized in your testimony, since 1996, Congress has included an annual appropriations rider prohibiting the CDC from lobbying for gun control. The rider, originally sponsored by the late Representative Jay Dickey (R-AR), provides that none of the funds made available to the CDC may be used “to advocate or promote gun control.”<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, some have misconstrued the rider as a ban on supporting scientific research into the causes of gun violence.

In response to a question from Representative Kathy Castor (D-FL) about the CDC’s ability to conduct gun violence prevention research, you agreed that the law has been misconstrued: “[M]y understanding is that the rider does not in any way impede our ability to conduct our research mission. It is simply about advocacy.” When Representative Castor sought your commitment to engage in gun violence prevention research, you responded:

“We believe we’ve got a very important mission with our work with serious mental illness as well as our ability to do research on the causes of violence and the causes behind tragedies like [the Parkland, Florida school shooting]. So that is a priority for us, especially at the Centers for Disease Control.”

And when pressed as to whether you would “be proactive” on gun violence prevention research, you added:

“We certainly will. Our Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — we’re in the science business and the evidence-generating business, and so I will have our

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<sup>1</sup> P.L. 104-208, 110 Stat. 3009-244 (Sept. 30, 1996).

agency certainly working in this field, as they do across the broad spectrum of disease control and prevention.”

With the CDC now poised to return to this critical public health and safety research, Congress needs to know how it can be supportive. I therefore respectfully request that by March 15, 2018 you provide responses to the following questions:

1. What directives have you issued, or do you anticipate issuing, to CDC staff that will empower them to begin gun violence prevention research? What is the timeline for this research to commence?
2. How many CDC staff do you intend to dedicate to this research? How will that staff be selected?
3. What existing funding will the CDC draw on to support this research?
4. As Congress considers funding for Fiscal Year 2019, does the CDC have an appropriations request that will enable the agency to effectively carry out its research on gun violence prevention?
5. What are the CDC’s top gun violence prevention research priorities? How does the CDC identify research projects on the issue? Are there specific research projects that CDC staff has already identified and on which it will be proceeding?
6. Since your testimony before the House Energy and Commerce Committee, has anyone from the White House contacted you concerning the position you articulated on gun violence prevention research? If so, please identify the individual(s) and the substance of the communication(s).
7. Should Congress eliminate the Dickey rider from future appropriations bills?

I applaud your commitment that the Dickey rider will no longer be permitted to stand in the way of CDC gun violence prevention research. America loses more than 33,000 lives annually to gun violence, and more than 80,000 people suffer from gun violence related injuries each year.<sup>2</sup> Before his death last year, Representative Dickey recognized that the rider was a mistake and forcefully advocated for a dramatic increase in federal funding for research into gun violence prevention.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence of the rider, policymakers, healthcare practitioners, researchers, and others have lacked comprehensive, scientific information about the causes and characteristics of gun violence or the best strategies to prevent it. The tragedy in Parkland, Florida once again reminds us that it is long past time we change that.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bradycampaign.org/key-gun-violence-statistics>.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/time-for-collaboration-on-gun-research/2015/12/25/f989cd1a-a819-11e5-bff5-905b92f5f94b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/time-for-collaboration-on-gun-research/2015/12/25/f989cd1a-a819-11e5-bff5-905b92f5f94b_story.html).