

United States Senate

June 24, 2020

The Honorable Michael R. Pence
Vice President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W.
Washington, DC 20050

Dr. Robert Redfield
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30329

Dear Vice President Pence and Director Redfield:

Testing, contact tracing, and isolation are key to controlling the COVID-19 pandemic and safely reopening our economy. In addition to continuing efforts to ramp up testing and support widespread contact tracing, federal agencies must also take steps to support voluntary isolation for individuals who test positive for the novel coronavirus or develop COVID-19, and voluntary quarantine for those who are exposed to the virus (collectively self-isolation). We write to urge the White House Coronavirus Task Force and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to provide guidance and assistance to states and local communities in supporting individuals' voluntary self-isolation and quarantine. The federal government must also ensure that people who most need additional resources to effectively self-isolate receive them, including immigrants, people of color, individuals with disabilities, individuals experiencing homelessness, and individuals at high risk of complications from the novel coronavirus. Without this critical support, efforts to control the pandemic and safely reopen our economy will be hindered significantly.

Even if the federal government succeeds in greatly expanding testing capacity — something that is long overdue — and building support for an army of contact tracers, the full public health impact of these steps will not be realized if individuals with COVID-19, and those exposed to them, cannot limit their contacts with others. Currently, patients who are diagnosed with COVID-19 are instructed to self-isolate.¹ Although it is possible to self-isolate at home, the vast

¹ *Social Distancing, Monitoring, Quarantine, or Isolation? (COVID-19)*, University of Texas at Austin University Health Services, https://healthyhorns.utexas.edu/coronavirus_exposure_action_chart.html (last accessed May 6, 2020).

majority of Americans do not have the appropriate space, resources, or support to self-isolate as needed.² In particular, low-income communities make up a disproportionately high number of COVID-19 cases but have the fewest resources to cope with the disease and may face significant barriers to self-isolation.³ Recent data from New York City shows that 66 percent of newly infected patients had been staying at home, suggesting that current self-isolation efforts are not working to prevent the spread of the infection.⁴

Self-isolation is challenging and costly. It requires space to separate from others, sufficient resources to forgo working, supplies to decontaminate shared spaces, and assistance in acquiring essential resources, such as food and medications. Many people lack a separate bedroom and/or bathroom in their homes to effectively self-isolate from family and loved-ones, and others may be living with vulnerable individuals. According to the World Health Organization, 75 to 85 percent of COVID-19 clusters in China occurred in families, clear evidence that household transmission plays a major role in the disease's spread.⁵

Government policies and assistance are needed to enable voluntary self-isolation. In particular, public health officials have identified three areas on which to focus: (1) voluntary self-isolation facilities, (2) income support for voluntary self-isolation, and (3) assistance with food, hygiene, and other necessary supplies.⁶ First, dedicated facilities are necessary for patients without safe spaces to self-isolate at home, especially those who cannot afford to relocate. Public health leaders recommend at least \$4.5 billion in funding to provide voluntary self-isolation facilities utilizing vacant hotels over the course of 18 months.⁶ Second, guaranteed paid sick leave for all individuals and some form of cash assistance for patients needing to self-isolate would enable workers to forgo work if infected or exposed to the coronavirus, therefore safeguarding their co-workers against exposure. As outbreaks across meat-packing plants have shown, without paid leave, employer-provided protections, or other supports for sick workers, infected employees at the workplace can seed outbreaks, shut down entire factories, and put the health of vulnerable

² Abraar Karan, *If you get covid-19, leaving your house may be the best way to protect your family*, Wash. Post (Apr. 21, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/04/21/isolate-home-coronavirus-quarantine/>.

³ Chris Wilson, *These Graphs Show How COVID-19 Is Ravaging New York City's Low-Income Neighborhoods*, Time (Apr. 15, 2020), <https://time.com/5821212/coronavirus-low-income-communities/>.

⁴ Chelsea Janes, *In some nations, government isolation centers helped reduce covid-19 infections. The U.S. has resisted the strategy.*, Wash. Post (May 20, 2020), https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/in-some-nations-government-isolation-centers-helped-reduce-covid-19-infections-the-us-has-resisted-the-strategy/2020/05/19/533850d6-9616-11ea-9f5e-56d8239bf9ad_story.html.

⁵ Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), World Health Organization (Feb. 24, 2020), <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-china-joint-mission-on-covid-19-final-report.pdf>.

⁶ *Going on the Offensive to Stop COVID-19*, Partners in Health (Apr. 30, 2020), <https://www.pih.org/article/going-offensive-stop-covid-19>; Andy Slavitt, Scott Gottlieb, et al., *Bipartisan Public Health Leaders Letter on COVID-19 Tracking and Tracing* (Apr. 27, 2020), <https://apps.npr.org/documents/document.html?id=6877567-Bipartisan-Public-Health-Leaders-Letter-on>.

individuals at risk.⁷ Third, the federal government needs to support delivery of food, hygiene supplies, and other necessary supplies. Successful self-isolation practices in Asia have included government-issued “quarantine care packages,” with groceries, masks, hand sanitizer, and instructions on how to clean and carefully dispose of contaminated materials.⁸ The United States must learn from these experiences and take proactive steps to enable those who must self-isolate to do so. All of these policies and supports must be provided regardless of immigration status.

Further, government programs must take steps to build trust with underserved communities and should take care to provide support in ways that are culturally sensitive and available in a range of languages. In particular, immigrant communities and communities of color have historically been and continue to be subject to excessive and disproportionate policing and enforcement actions, which have bred justifiable distrust of the government. The federal government must not employ coercive practices or enforce participation in self-isolation programs, and instead, should work to promote public trust so that these communities do not fear participating in self-isolation programs. Further, government programs should be tailored to ensure that support reaches communities with the greatest need for this support.

In light of the preceding, we request a response to the following questions by June 26, 2020:

1. What guidance have you given to states and local communities on how to best support isolation and quarantine efforts? What plans do you have to further develop or expand this guidance?
2. How many isolation beds do you predict the United States will need in the next one month, three months, and six months?
3. What are you doing to support states and local communities in establishing voluntary self-isolation and self-quarantine facilities? What plans does the federal government have to provide financial or technical assistance to support self-isolation facilities?
4. What steps is the Trump administration taking to ensure support is being provided without regard to immigration status?
5. What steps is the Trump administration taking to ensure that self-isolation support is reaching all communities, in particular people of color, individuals with disabilities and individuals experiencing homelessness?
6. How do you plan to enable people to stay at home if they test positive for the coronavirus, are experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, or have had a close contact with someone who is infected?

⁷ Haven Orecchio-Egresitz, *The more you come to work the more exposure you have': A work-while-sick culture leaves meat-plant employees fearing for their lives during the pandemic*, Business Insider (May 6, 2020), <https://www.businessinsider.com/few-safeguards-meat-plant-workers-live-in-fear-2020-5>.

⁸ Matthew Yglesias, *The successful Asian coronavirus-fighting strategy America refuses to embrace*, Vox (Apr. 28, 2020), <https://www.vox.com/2020/4/28/21238456/centralized-isolation-coronavirus-hong-kong-korea>.

- a. Do you support additional financial assistance for those not covered by paid sick leave and additional steps like providing food delivery, hygiene kits, and other necessary supplies to those in self-isolation?
 - b. Have you identified any federal programs that can support individuals who are self-isolating or quarantining?
7. The Department of Labor's current interpretation of federal COVID-19 paid sick leave requirements excludes tens of millions of workers from coverage, and as much as 83 percent of the private sector workforce could potentially be excluded.⁹ Based on the Department of Labor's own analysis, to what extent will inadequate paid sick policies contribute to further spread of the disease in the workplace and undermine voluntary and self-isolation?

Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

Jack Reed
United States Senator

CC White House Coronavirus Task Force Members

⁹ Sarah Jane Glynn, *Coronavirus Paid Leave Exemptions Exclude Millions of Workers from Coverage*, Center for American Progress (Apr. 17, 2020), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/news/2020/04/17/483287/coronavirus-paid-leave-exemptions-exclude-millions-workers-coverage/>.