

United States Senate

April 1, 2020

Marcia McNutt, PhD
President
National Academy of Sciences
The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine
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Washington, DC 20001

John L. Anderson, PhD
President
National Academy of Engineering
The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine
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Victor J. Dzau, MD
President
National Academy of Medicine
The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine
500 Fifth Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001

Dear Drs. McNutt, Anderson, and Dzau,

We write today to call on you to provide clear, unbiased, apolitical information to the American public and our state and local leaders about the novel coronavirus and the disease it causes (COVID-19). We applaud your quick action in forming a standing committee within the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) to provide expertise to the federal government in response to the coronavirus pandemic.¹ The NASEM Standing Committee on Emerging Infectious Diseases and 21st Century Health Threats is filling the crucial role of helping to “inform the federal government on critical science and policy issues related to emerging infectious diseases.”² In this rapidly evolving public health emergency, the committee’s knowledge and expertise will provide a trusted voice.

However, our nation is in desperate need of unbiased, accurate information relayed directly to the public and to state and local decision makers. Although a rapid response provided directly to the federal government is critically important, the expertise NASEM has convened should

¹ Press Release, Nat’l Academies of Scis., Eng’g, & Med., *White House Requests National Academies Standing Committee on Emerging Infectious Diseases and 21st Century Health Threats in Response to Spread of Coronavirus* (Feb. 28, 2020), <https://www.nationalacademies.org/news/2020/02/white-house-requests-national-academies-standing-committee-on-emerging-infectious-diseases-and-21st-century-health-threats-in-response-to-spread-of-coronavirus>.

² Nat’l Academies of Scis., Eng’g, & Med., *Standing Committee on Emerging Infectious Diseases and 21st Century Health Threats*, <https://www.nationalacademies.org/our-work/standing-committee-on-emerging-infectious-diseases-and-21st-century-health-threats> (last accessed Mar. 26, 2020).

continue to be used for more. We call on you to further extend your efforts to disseminate accurate and apolitical information about the coronavirus directly to the public.

Unfortunately, the Trump administration has misled the public, twisted the truth for political gain, and repeatedly blurred the lines between opinion and fact. President Trump has pushed aside or marginalized public health and scientific experts in his administration.³ He has overstated the extent to which the virus is under control and claimed he had long warned of its potential danger.⁴ The editor-in-chief of *Science* magazine called out the president, warning: “that kind of distortion and denial is dangerous After 3 years of debating whether the words of this administration matter, the words are now clearly a matter of life and death.”⁵

Conflicting messages from the Trump administration have caused confusion and chaos in the national response.⁶ Governors, mayors, and public health officials are faced with monumental decisions in a time of high uncertainty. How do state and local officials decide when to open up school and businesses? How long should they maintain social distancing practices? What is the appropriate balance between mitigation and containment? While evaluating these decisions, what are realistic timescales in which to expect treatments or vaccines? Although the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health are capable and well-qualified to help address many of these questions, we have seen the Trump administration’s willingness to stifle the ability of these agencies to communicate openly with the public. The public needs a trusted authority outside of the executive branch.

Our nation’s governors, mayors, and public health officials must have access to unbiased, apolitical, and accurate information. The NASEM Standing Committee already has a team of experts convened that can provide evidence-based guidance to the public, with no political interference. But this crisis is not operating on the standard scientific timeline. We cannot wait weeks for scientists to publish research; we need experts with deep ties to the research community to communicate with the public and our leaders and highlight the most critical information.

We appreciate that NASEM has made its rapid expert consultations reports available to the public and that the National Academy of Medicine has established a public hub for its

³ Ashley Parker et al., *Trump versus the scientists: The president’s tug-of-war with experts over coronavirus policy*, *Wash. Post* (Mar. 24, 2020), https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-versus-scientists-coronavirus/2020/03/24/0ff92b28-6ddb-11ea-96a0-df4c5d9284af_story.html.

⁴ Dan Mangan, *Trump dismissed coronavirus pandemic worry in January — now claims he long warned about it*, *CNBC* (Mar. 18, 2020), <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/17/trump-dissed-coronavirus-pandemic-worry-now-claims-he-warned-about-it.html>.

⁵ H. Holden Thorp, *Do us a favor*, *Science* (Mar. 13, 2020), <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/367/6483/1169.full>.

⁶ Libby Cathey, *5 mixed messages from Trump that have marred his administration’s coronavirus response*, *ABC News* (Mar. 19, 2020), <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/mixed-messages-trump-marred-administrations-coronavirus-response/story?id=69625769>.

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coronavirus resources⁷. We urge you to continue to use the Standing Committee on Emerging Infectious Diseases to establish a transparent and regular line of communication with the public and the press. During this public health emergency, we must lean on the expertise of scientists, physicians, and engineers. We depend upon you to provide evidence-based information to help guide decision-makers to make the best decisions in moments of uncertainty but extraordinary consequence. Lives depend on the decisions we make today.

Sincerely,

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

⁷ National Academy of Medicine, *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)*, <https://nam.edu/coronavirus-resources/> (last accessed March 27, 2020).