

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

GABRIELLE D'ADAMO SINGER, STAFF DIRECTOR
DAVID M. WEINBERG, MINORITY STAFF DIRECTOR

May 19, 2020

The Honorable Ron Johnson
Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Johnson:

We write to request you convene a Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee hearing immediately to examine the federal government's response to COVID-19. It is the obligation of Congress, and specifically the obligation of our committee, to conduct oversight of the country's response to this virus. Our nation is in the middle of a battle against the worst pandemic in over a century. This virus has killed over 90,000 Americans in the last three months alone – more than twice as many lives as the typical influenza claims in an entire year in the United States. Unfortunately, despite the valiant efforts of heroic frontline workers and public health officials across the country, death tolls continue to rise. This pandemic presents an ongoing threat to our national and economic security, and we are continuing to face dire warnings from public health officials that we could see a resurgence of cases in the fall.

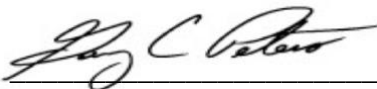
In the face of this crisis, our federal government's response has so far come up short. Although we are ramping up testing capacity, that effort came far too late to be able to successfully contain the virus, and many individuals who need to be tested are still unable to access those tests. We have increased the acquisition and distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other medical supplies, but our nation's hospitals, health care systems, and nursing homes, as well as first responders and other essential workers, are still reporting alarming shortages, putting the lives of these frontline workers at risk. In addition, the Administration has not addressed additional factors necessary to ensure a safe and systematic reopening of our economy, including availability of vital prescription drugs, extensive contact tracing capacity, and guidance for businesses, large and small, to ensure our citizens are protected to the greatest extent possible.

One of Congress's most important responsibilities is to conduct oversight of the federal government, addressing problems and finding solutions to serve our constituents. However, we cannot do this without access to accurate data and testimony from the individuals that are spearheading our response to this pandemic. As the Senate's designated oversight committee, we should be leading these efforts – starting with oversight of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which the President designated as the lead federal agency for COVID-19 response. The President has also championed a "whole of government" response, which falls within our jurisdiction to oversee intergovernmental efforts. Last week, the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions held a productive and informative bipartisan hearing with government witnesses to shed light on part of the federal government's COVID-19 response, demonstrating that such a hearing is possible. Our committee has a responsibility to ask tough questions on the pandemic response and get answers for the American people at a time when they are most in need.

A thorough and rigorous examination of the federal government's response to date will help Congress ensure that successful programs can be amplified and ongoing challenges can be addressed. These efforts are critical to supporting our nation's pandemic response, but they can only be accomplished by convening a public hearing with the federal government officials responsible for managing the COVID-19 response. This hearing is overdue, and we urge you to schedule and convene a hearing as soon as possible to fulfill our oversight duties and get the American people the answers they deserve. Therefore, we request you invite FEMA Administrator Peter Gaynor to appear, as FEMA is the agency leading federal response efforts. We also request you invite Department of Health and Human Services Assistant Secretary for Health Admiral Brett Giroir, who is responsible for expanding COVID-19 testing throughout the country; White House Coronavirus Supply Chain Stabilization Task Force lead Navy Rear Admiral John Polowczyk, who is responsible for collecting and distributing vital medical supplies; and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Dr. Robert Redfield, who is responsible for coordinating medical care facilities throughout the country and their combined response to COVID-19.

Our citizens face a grave threat, and they deserve answers about what their government is doing to help them through this trying time. We look forward to working with you to continue executing our committee's authorized responsibilities throughout this national crisis.

Sincerely,




Gary C. Peters
Ranking Member



Thomas R. Carper
United States Senator



Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator



Jacky Rosen
United States Senator



Kyrsten Sinema
United States Senator