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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

GABRIELLE D'ADAMO SINGER, STAFF DIRECTOR
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May 19, 2020

The Honorable Gary C. Peters, Ranking Member
The Honorable Thomas R. Carper
The Honorable Margaret Wood Hassan
The Honorable Kamala D. Harris
The Honorable Jacky Rosen
The Honorable Kyrsten Sinema
United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs

Dear Colleagues:

I am in receipt of the letter you sent me earlier today, and appreciate your interest in the Committee's oversight of the country's response to COVID-19. Tens of thousands of Americans and hundreds of thousands across the world have tragically lost their lives to the pandemic. I, too, believe a thorough review of the federal government's response efforts is needed. And I'm sure you'll agree that such a rigorous review must also include our government's preparation efforts over the last decade. That is why I have held three hearings or roundtables on these issues to date with a fourth planned for early next month, and why we've engaged in and supported several other oversight efforts.

You stated in your letter that the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions committee just recently held an "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." I'm sure you'll recall that our Committee held an informative bipartisan hearing with some of the federal government officials responsible for managing the COVID-19 response on March 5. The hearing was titled, *The Federal Interagency Response to the Coronavirus and Preparing for Future Global Pandemics*, and included the Acting Deputy Secretary for the Department of Homeland Security and the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response for the Department of Health and Human Services.

That hearing followed our February 12 roundtable, *Are We Prepared? Protecting the U.S. from Global Pandemics*, with the former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the former commissioner of the Food & Drug Administration, and the former director for Medical and Biodefense Preparedness at the National Security Council, among others.

And on May 6, our Committee held the first-of-its-kind Senate live-streamed video hearing titled, *COVID-19: How New Information Should Drive Policy*. The hearing included six doctors and experts with diverse views on how the federal government has made decisions about

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testing and stay-at-home orders, and how we should think about this next phase in our COVID-19 response.

And – as you already know – we have scheduled a hearing for early June and are working with federal agencies as well as the Task Force to coordinate the appropriate panel. Those of you who joined last week’s phone call with the Federal Emergency Management Agency know that I asked Administrator Peter Gaynor to come in to testify, and he graciously agreed. Ranking Member Peters is also aware that my staff already reached out to several of the other officials mentioned in your letter.

In addition to our public-facing work, the Committee has worked on our own oversight efforts and supported other watchdogs’ oversight. Ranking Member Peters and I worked on legislation that was adopted in the CARES Act that created the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee to perform its own audits and coordinate work among inspectors general to oversee the federal government’s response, as well as language to provide specific authority for the Government Accountability Office to perform its work. And in late March, I directed Committee staff to begin a comprehensive fact-finding investigation into several questions regarding our federal preparedness efforts and response to COVID-19. As we develop information as part of this investigation, we will have additional briefings, hearings, and public reports as appropriate to inform Committee members and the American public.

As you stated in your letter, we are battling against “the worst pandemic in over a century”. To do this, the federal officials you reference in your letter have been working around the clock, all the while committing significant time and resources to keeping Congress and our Committee well informed. In addition to the hearings before our Committee and others, the federal officials in charge of response efforts have gone to great lengths to make themselves available to members in weekly telephonic briefings, including smaller briefings with just members of this Committee. I am grateful to them for their tireless work on behalf of the American people. As Chairman, I will continue to ensure that our Committee conducts rigorous, thorough oversight while also being respectful of these officials’ limited time and grave responsibilities.

Sincerely,



Ron Johnson
Chairman