

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 13, 2020

The Honorable Robert O'Brien
Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. O'Brien:

As the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak that began in December in Wuhan, China continues to accelerate, we strongly urge you to appoint a qualified, dedicated, senior global health security expert to coordinate the United States' global health security work, including the response to and containment of this and other global health emergencies. This action is long overdue. According to reports, in May 2018, "the head of global health security on the White House's National Security Council left the Trump Administration."¹ Almost two years later, this position on the National Security Council (NSC) remains vacant. We urge immediate action, as well as your response to questions regarding the NSC's readiness.

In May 2018, some of us wrote to then-National Security Advisor John Bolton regarding our concerns about this vacancy, noting "[t]he threat of a pandemic is serious, and it's important families know we have a vigilant and experienced team in place and working to protect us against such public health threats."² We asked a series of questions about how the NSC would handle global health security threats. But we received no answers to our questions.

These questions are even more salient today. Over 44,600 people have contracted the novel coronavirus, and it has killed more than 1,113 people; Chinese officials have placed travel restrictions on tens of millions of citizens.³ The virus has spread to over 20 countries. While according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "for the general American public, who are unlikely to be exposed to this virus, the immediate health risk from 2019-nCoV is considered low at this time,"⁴ there have been thirteen confirmed cases in the United States.

¹ Huffington Post, "Sudden Departure of White House Global Health Security Has Experts Worried," Lauren Weber, May 9, 2018 (https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/tim-ziemer-global-health-security-leaves_us_5af37dfbe4b0859d11d02290?h9k).

² Letter from Sens. Murray and Warren to National Security Advisor John Bolton, May 18, 2018, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2018.05.18%20Letter%20to%20NSA%20John%20Bolton%20About%20Departure%20to%20Top%20Global%20Public%20Health%20Staff.pdf>.

³ New York Times, "Wuhan Coronavirus: Latest Updates," <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/12/world/asia/coronavirus-china-covid-19.html>, Feb. 12, 2020.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) Situation Summary," <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/summary.html>, updated February 7, 2020.

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the CDC play a critical leadership role in the current response; the NSC's coordination can and should complement this leadership.

The World Health Organization has declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern,⁵ and on January 31, 2020, HHS Secretary Alex Azar declared a public health emergency in the United States.⁶ President Trump has also established the President's Coronavirus Task Force, of which you are a member.⁷ But you are not a public health expert, and it is not clear if the NSC has such an expert in position to effectively advise or coordinate its global public health work on the Task Force and in other areas. Families concerned about the novel coronavirus threat need to know the NSC has a dedicated, senior official with appropriate expertise and authority to address the domestic and global health threats from the virus. It is of paramount importance that this person approaches this role through a public health lens. We, therefore, ask you to provide answers to the following questions:

1. Is NSC working to hire a dedicated, senior global health security expert?
 - a. If so, please describe the qualifications this expert will have.
 - b. If so, please describe the responsibilities they will have.

2. Who is the top official at the NSC responsible for global health security?
 - a. To what extent and how often does this person meet with key leaders from the Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institutes of Health, Food and Drug Administration, and other public health agencies with regard to global health security?
 - b. To what extent does this person coordinate efforts between public health agencies and other federal agencies involved in global health security and public health responses, including the Department of Defense, the Department of Transportation, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of State, and the U.S. Agency for International Development with regard to global health security?
 - c. To what extent does this person communicate with relevant international public health organizations and foreign agencies and officials with regard to global health security?

3. Who is the top official at the NSC responsible for managing the United States' response to novel coronavirus?

⁵ World Health Organization, "Statement on the second meeting of the International Health Regulations (2005) Emergency Committee regarding the outbreak of novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV)," January 30, 2020, <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/30-01-2020-statement-on-the-second-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-%282005%29-emergency-committee-regarding-the-outbreak-of-novel-coronavirus-%282019-ncov%29>.

⁶ Department of Health and Human Services, "Secretary Azar Declares Public Health Emergency for United States for 2019 Novel Coronavirus," press release, January 31, 2020, <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2020/01/31/secretary-azar-declares-public-health-emergency-us-2019-novel-coronavirus.html>.

⁷ The White House, "Statement from the Press Secretary Regarding the President's Coronavirus Task Force," January 29, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-regarding-presidents-coronavirus-task-force/>.

- a. What role, if any, does this person play on the President's Coronavirus Task Force?
- b. To what extent and how often does this person meet with key leaders from the Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institutes of Health, Food and Drug Administration, and other public health agencies with regard to the response to novel coronavirus? What are the primary roles and responsibilities of this individual with regard to the federal government's coordinated response to the virus?
- c. To what extent does this person coordinate efforts between public health agencies and other federal agencies involved in global health security and public health responses, including the Department of Defense, the Department of Transportation, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of State, and the U.S. Agency for International Development with regard to the response to novel coronavirus?
- d. To what extent does this person communicate with relevant international public health organizations and foreign agencies and officials (including members of the Chinese government) to respond to novel coronavirus?

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We ask that you provide answers to our questions no later than February 27, 2020.

Sincerely,



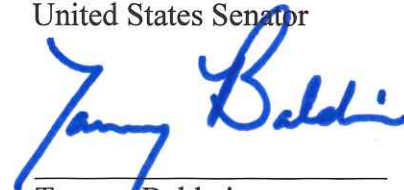
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



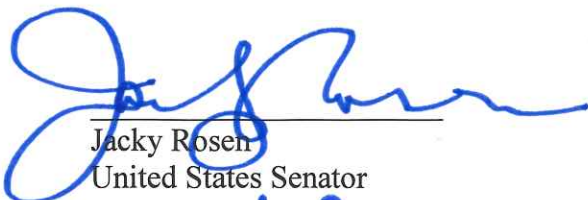
Patty Murray
United States Senator



Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



Jacky Rosen
United States Senator



Robert Menendez
United States Senator



Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

Kirsten Gillibrand

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

Martin Heinrich

Martin Heinrich
United States Senator

Tammy Duckworth

Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

Bob Casey, Jr.

Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator

Jeanne Shaheen

Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

Jack Reed

Jack Reed
United States Senator

Gary C. Peters

Gary C. Peters
United States Senator

Richard Blumenthal

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

Christopher S. Murphy

Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator

Tina Smith

Tina Smith
United States Senator

Michael F. Bennet

Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator

Brian Schatz

Brian Schatz
United States Senator

Debbie Stabenow

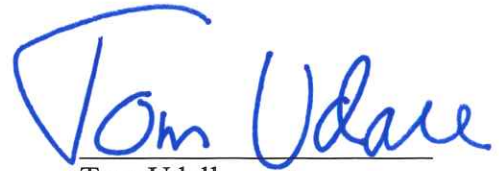
Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator

Jeffrey A. Merkley

Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



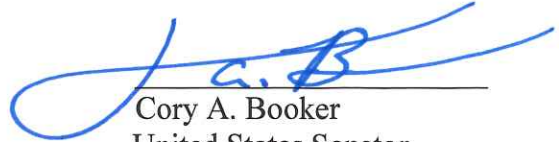
Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



Tom Udall
United States Senator



Maria Cantwell
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator