

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 9, 2020

Vice President Mike Pence  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Vice President Pence:

We write to you in your capacity as head of the White House Task Force on Coronavirus to express our deep concern about the troubling press conference held on Friday, March 6, 2020, by President Trump, Dr. Robert Redfield, the Director of the Centers for Disease Control, and Alex Azar, the Secretary of Health and Human Services.<sup>1</sup> At the press conference, President Trump spread misinformation about coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and federal efforts to combat its spread—threatening to confuse the public and muddle the streamlined response that you have been asked to lead. During this crisis, the American public needs the Trump administration to provide clear, consistent, science-based information about COVID-19; we urge you to ensure that future communications meet this standard.

The March 6 press conference came at the end of a grim week of news regarding the spread of COVID-19. The nation learned that there have been more than a dozen reported deaths from COVID-19 in the United States and that the virus had been spreading in the country for weeks. Schools and institutions of higher education began announcing closures;<sup>2</sup> over 3,500 passengers, including American citizens, on the coronavirus-infected Grand Princess cruise ship were stuck in a “hellish” quarantine as Administration officials debated whether to allow the ship to dock in the United States.<sup>3</sup> It became increasingly clear that the failure of the Trump Administration to manufacture and distribute COVID-19 tests had resulted in a dramatic undercount of COVID-19 cases, increasing public health risks and creating “an embarrassing fiasco of national proportions.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Guardian, “Trump offers boasts and insults at CDC press conference on coronavirus-as it happened,” Sam Levin and Joanna Walters, March 6, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/live/2020/mar/06/joe-biden-bernie-sanders-2020-presidential-election-trump-coronavirus-live-updates>.

<sup>2</sup> New York Times, “Forfeited Games and Virtual Learning: Coronavirus Shuts Down Schools,” John Eligon, Ellen Barry, and Karen Weise, March 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/08/us/coronavirus-schools-san-francisco-seattle.html>.

<sup>3</sup> New York Post, “Grand Princess cruise passenger describes hellish coronavirus quarantine,” Sara Dorn, March 7, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/03/07/grand-princess-cruise-passenger-describes-hellish-coronavirus-quarantine/>.

<sup>4</sup> New York Times, “With Test Kits in Short Supply, Health Officials Sound Alarms,” Katie Thomas, Sarah Kliff, and Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, March 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/06/health/testing-coronavirus.html>.

Despite these cascading problems, Friday's press conference began with CDC Director Redfield praising President Trump's "decisive leadership" in the public health crisis.<sup>5</sup> President Trump then spoke, making numerous comments suggesting that he does not understand the contours nor gravity of COVID-19's spread. He claimed, among other things that "anybody that needs a test, gets a test"<sup>6</sup>—a statement that is not accurate and served to spread confusion about testing protocols and test accessibility. When asked about the status of the individuals on the Grand Princess ship, he was more interested in keeping the "numbers" of the coronavirus low than with objectively assessing the crisis and providing needed medical care, stating:

They would like to have the people come off. I would like to have the people stay. I told them to make the final decision. I would rather – because I like the numbers being where they are, I didn't need to have the numbers double because of one ship that wasn't our fault.<sup>7</sup>

As the press conference continued, President Trump then harshly and personally criticized Governor Jay Inslee, whose state has been the most heavily affected by COVID-19, stating that "I told Mike [Pence] not to be complimentary of that governor because that governor is a snake. Let me just tell you we have a lot of problems with the governor."<sup>8</sup>

This series of false, politicized, and nonsensical statements by the President are deeply troubling. Friday's press conference was a disservice to the nation and the non-partisan scientists and public health experts at the CDC and across the federal government. These individuals are working hard to address this crisis, but rather than supporting these experts, the President is undermining their work in public and, reportedly, in private.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the President's statements contribute to confusion about how the public and medical professionals should respond to COVID-19—threatening to undermine an already slow and mismanaged response to the disease. It is essential that the response you are directing is guided by scientific evidence and principles, rather than aimed at misdirected goals of assuaging the President's ego and hiding his lack of public health knowledge from the American people.

To address our concerns, we ask that you provide answers to the following questions no later than March 23, 2020:

1. What did the President mean when he referred to his desire to have the quarantined individuals remain on the Grand Princess because he "likes the numbers being where they are?"

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<sup>5</sup> Politico, "Trump's mismanagement helped fuel coronavirus crisis," Dan Diamond, March 7, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/07/trump-coronavirus-management-style-123465>.

<sup>6</sup> Washington Post, "Squandered time: How the Trump Administration lost control of the coronavirus crisis," Ashley Parker, Yasmeen Abutaleb, and Lena H. Sun, March 7, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-coronavirus-response-squandered-time/2020/03/07/5c47d3d0-5fcb-11ea-9055-5fa12981bbbf\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-coronavirus-response-squandered-time/2020/03/07/5c47d3d0-5fcb-11ea-9055-5fa12981bbbf_story.html).

<sup>7</sup> New York Times, "Trump Says 'People Have to Remain Calm' Amid Coronavirus Outbreak," Peter Baker, March 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/06/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-cdc.html>.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> Associated Press, "Official: White House Didn't Want to Tell Seniors Not to Fly," March 6, 2020, <https://apnews.com/921ad7f1f08d7634bf681ba785faf269s>.

2. Did the President's comments reflect Administration policy on how to handle the quarantined individuals?
3. Two weeks ago, Senator Warren wrote to you regarding the chaotic transfer of infected Americans from the Diamond Princess cruise ship in Japan, seeking information on the decision-making process for handling these types of cases.<sup>10</sup> You have not yet responded, and are again faced with a confusing and risky situation on the Grand Princess. As of Sunday morning, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Ben Carson indicated that the plan for helping these passengers still "hasn't been fully formulated."<sup>11</sup>
  - a. Who is in charge of making decisions about the individuals on the Grand Princess?
  - b. On what basis are they making decisions about how to handle both infected and non-infected passengers?
  - c. When does the Administration intend to formalize a plan for assisting individuals on the ship?
4. Has the President instructed or implied to you or other Task Force members that your goal should be to misleadingly limit the reported number of cases in the United States by (1) refusing entry into the United States for infected citizens to reduce the number of reported cases or (2) any other means?
5. Has Governor Inslee or any Washington state officials made any requests of the Administration for resources or assistance that have been denied?
6. Was Director Redfield instructed by you, other Task Force officials, or other White House officials on the content of his comments at the March 6, 2020 press conference?


Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

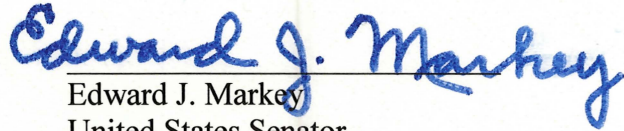
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<sup>10</sup> U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren, "Senator Warren Raises Concerns with Federal Agencies over Troubling Decision-Making Process, Citing 'Confusion and Disagreement' During Evacuation of Americans with Coronavirus from Diamond Princess Cruise Ship in Japan," February 26, 2020, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/oversight/letters/senator-warren-raises-concerns-with-federal-agencies-over-troubling-decision-making-process-citing-confusion-and-disagreement-during-evacuation-of-americans-with-coronavirus-from-diamond-princess-cruise-ship-in-japan>.

<sup>11</sup> ABC News Sunday Morning, Interview with Ben Carson, March 7, 2020, <https://twitter.com/ABC/status/1236645021719412737?s=20>.

Sincerely,

  
Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator

  
Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator