October 19, 2020

President Donald J. Trump
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Trump:

We write to encourage you to take decisive steps to modernize our public health data infrastructure so that we can more effectively combat the scourge of COVID-19 with accurate, timely and precise data.

After 9/11 and the subsequent anthrax attacks, Congress recognized that the CDC's antiquated reporting system could lead to an ill-informed public health response that could cost lives during a public health crisis. It also recognized that a catastrophic public health situation could cripple the economy, sicken the country, and weaken national security. Access to real-time information was a key component in the congressionally mandated strategy to address emerging public health threats, including future terror attacks, Zika, Ebola, hurricanes, COVID-19, and opioid abuse.

In 2006, 2013, and 2019, Congress passed laws directing the CDC to modernize its antiquated and burdensome public health data systems. It directed the agency to create a near-real-time data network for information collection, analysis, and dissemination to help prepare public health offices and frontline health workers to respond to emerging threats.

It is shocking that CDC has failed to comply with these laws. Despite fourteen years and billions of dollars spent, CDC has yet to implement a nationwide, modern and uniform information-management and reporting system to help guide policymakers, public health officials and front-line health care workers.

Governors and health officials have not been able to rely on this system to identify hotspots and to make decisions about lockdowns, travel restrictions and opening up businesses. This unfortunate failure has caused many jurisdictions to close down businesses, schools, churches and other enterprises based on faulty information about health system capacity, community spread, and infection and mortality rates. This has harmed our economy and our nation's finances, while having serious negative impact on the mental and physical health of society, especially children.

This is not acceptable and it must be fixed.

We write to encourage you to reverse more than a decade of failure by directing CDC to immediately begin work with private sector experts to build a nationwide public health system capable of informing decision making with near-real-time data. We suggest this work include the recommendations laid out in the attached Heritage Foundation report, including:

1. Identifying, prioritizing and standardizing data need to improve public health;

2. Automating reporting to reduce nurse, doctor and pharmacist burden;
3. A data hub capable of receiving and sharing information to improve response; and
4. Strong enforcement of privacy and security protocols with stiff penalties for misuse.

These changes can and should begin immediately, with a system in place within a year. The best way to do this is to fill existing gaps in infrastructure while relying on the data and systems already being used and recorded by health care providers. We don't need to rip up and replace the system, we need to get smarter about using existing information flows to improve public and clinical health. We need real data, in real-time to improve health and to end the seemingly endless shutdowns.

Congress has required such a system in law and funded it with appropriations. All that is needed now is the political will to make it happen. We encourage you to bring your leadership to this critical need.

Sincerely,

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