

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 8, 2020

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Azar,

We are writing you today to urge you to prioritize the creation and execution of a national testing strategy to address the widespread shortfalls in COVID-19 testing across the United States. Without more testing, our communities will not be able to unwind the dramatic social distancing measures that have been put in place to prevent the spread of coronavirus. This testing strategy will be critical as we move forward to the next phases of defeating this pandemic.

This testing strategy should prioritize both rapid and widespread diagnostic and serologic testing, and it should guide the specific and tailored approaches our states and communities are taking to tackle the virus. Serologic testing is key to understanding how widespread the virus is in the United States. It promises to allow public health officials to determine who's had coronavirus, who is immune, and for how long. But there is a lot we do not know about this immunity. For that reason, the administration needs to prioritize the development of serologic testing and immunity studies. Only when we have a firm understanding of this immunity will communities begin to safely unwind social distancing measures which are dramatically impacting our economy.

Rapid diagnostic testing continues to be critical. It enables public health officials to understand how many have the disease and need medical care. Without more rapid diagnostic tests, our communities are flying blind, creating incredible uncertainty for our frontline healthcare workers and public health officials. Members of Congress continue to be deeply alarmed about the reports of testing shortfalls and testing supply availability. It is past time that the administration used every tool in its power to fix these problems.

Going forward, as social distancing reduces the prevalence of the virus in our communities, we know that clusters of infection will continue to occur. Widespread diagnostic testing, coupled with robust contact tracing, will enable public health officials to immediately identify and contain these clusters.

But this national testing strategy will require dedicated personnel to implement it. The federal government will need to work with state and community public health officials to ensure they have the resources and manpower to conduct testing and contact tracing on such a widespread scale. National serological testing will need a large workforce to conduct widespread testing of Americans. Traditional serologic tests are relatively simple and safe to administer. In some states and communities, health care workers are stretched to the breaking point trying to stem the onslaught of coronavirus.

For that reason, the administration should establish and utilize a reserve public health workforce composed of individuals like recently returned Peace Corps volunteers or members of AmeriCorps. These individuals could also be used to enact widespread contact tracing or vaccine administration as we continue our efforts to defeat this virus.

We hope you will consider these recommendations. They are urgent and experts agree that they need to be implemented now. Without a national testing strategy to help communities identify who is infected and who may be immune, we will not be able to protect our health care systems, our fellow Americans, and return our country to its fully functioning, vibrant self. There's no time to wait.

Congress stands ready to assist the administration as it moves forward to enact these items.

Sincerely,



Ami Bera, M.D.
Member of Congress



Bill Foster
Member of Congress



Chrissy Houlahan
Member of Congress