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January 23, 2020

The Honorable Secretary Alex Azar  
Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

As Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asia, The Pacific, And International Cybersecurity Policy, I am writing to inquire about the efforts of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to address the growing threat of the novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) originating out of Wuhan, China.

Coronaviruses run the gamut from ordinary variants that can cause symptoms akin to the common cold to serious variants responsible for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS).<sup>1</sup> Some coronaviruses may be transmitted from animals to humans, others can be transmitted from person to person via respiratory droplets, akin to transmission of influenza.

Since the initial reports of 2019-nCoV on December 31, 2019, China has confirmed over 600 infections, with 17 deaths and many more resulting in critical illness. Infections have also been documented in Thailand, South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, Hong Kong, and, as of January 21, 2020, the first case of 2019-nCoV was reported in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, reports of infections of health care workers and others not exposed to the animal market believed to be the source of this outbreak, confirm that human-to-human transmission of 2019-nCoV is occurring.<sup>3</sup>

There are no specific medications that target coronaviruses, instead supportive measures are given to treat the symptoms of the infections, such as fever and congestion.<sup>4</sup> Individuals with

<sup>1</sup> Ctr. for Disease Control and Prevention, Coronavirus, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/index.html> (last reviewed Jan. 22, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Ctr. for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) Situation Summary, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/summary.html> (last reviewed Jan. 22, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Sybilla Gross and Dong Lyu, China Virus Spreads to Health Workers, Bloomberg Business (Jan. 20, 2020), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-01-21/fourth-china-virus-death-reported-raising-contagion-concerns>.

<sup>4</sup> Ctr. for Disease Control and Prevention, Coronavirus: Prevention and Treatment, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/about/prevention.html> (last reviewed Aug. 6, 2019).

mild illness are often directed to stay home and avoid unnecessary contact with others. Sicker patients may be hospitalized with treatment focused on addressing severe symptoms, including intravenous fluids and pressurized oxygen.<sup>5</sup>

Given the quick growth of this outbreak in China, and its expansion across Asia and now to the United States, we need to ensure that our government is prepared for the compounded impact this virus may have during an already active cold and flu season. As we learned during the Ebola outbreak, early identification and intervention is critical. Please respond by February 7, 2020 with responses to the following questions:

1. What is HHS's plan to address the threat of 2019-nCoV in the United States?
2. What research is being done to develop antiviral, vaccines or other treatments for 2019-nCoV in particular, or coronaviruses more generally? How similar is the structure and etiology of 2019-nCoV and MERS and SARS CoV? To what extent can previous research on SARS and MERS be used to inform or advance research on 2019-nCoV treatments or vaccines?
3. What is the current policy for collecting and sharing high quality, timely, and comprehensive public health surveillance data between hospitals, diagnostic laboratories, public health agencies, and academic institutions within the United States and between the United States and the international community for this outbreak of 2019-nCoV?
4. What steps is HHS taking to advise health care providers and others in the health care workforce about appropriate precautions to prevent transmission of 2019-nCoV?
5. What guidance is HHS providing to healthcare facilities and state public health departments regarding the surveillance and monitoring of potential nCoV infections?
6. What steps is HHS taking to utilize resources marshalled to respond to Ebola to control 2019-nCoV? In particular, has HHS considered activating regional hospital hubs to treat 2019-nCoV cases, if, and when, additional cases are identified in the United States?
7. How is HHS using its previous experience with MERS and SARS to inform its response to 2019-nCoV? Has HHS updated its 2004 Public Health Guidance for Community-Level Preparedness and Response for SARS, or its 2015 guidance to Public, Clinicians, and Public Health Authorities for MERS?

Thank you for your consideration of this important matter. If you have questions or concerns, please contact Adam Axler in my office at 202-224-2742.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator

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<sup>5</sup> See *id.*