

EDWARD J. MARKEY
MASSACHUSETTS

COMMITTEES:

ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS

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SUBCOMMITTEE ON SECURITY

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U.S. SENATE CLIMATE CHANGE TASK FORCE

United States Senate

SUITE SD-255
DIRKSEN BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2107
202-224-2742

975 JFK FEDERAL BUILDING
15 NEW SUDBURY STREET
BOSTON, MA 02203
617-565-8519

222 MILLIKEN BOULEVARD, SUITE 312
FALL RIVER, MA 02721
508-677-0523

1550 MAIN STREET, 4TH FLOOR
SPRINGFIELD, MA 01103
413-785-4610

January 27, 2020

Donald J. Trump
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 25000

Dear Mr. President:

I write to raise significant concern about the lack of a White House level global health chief who would prove critical to tightly coordinate a whole government approach to the rapidly evolving public health crisis being caused by the 2019 novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV).

Just a few days ago, Chinese President Xi Jinping warned that the country is facing a “grave situation” due to the outbreak of this virus¹. Even with established travel restrictions in several affected cities, the 2019-nCoV has killed at least 80 people and infected approximately 2,800 individuals since Chinese authorities discovered the virus in the city of Wuhan, just a few weeks ago.² The virus is spreading rapidly, causing Chinese officials to close schools, shut down some public transportation routes, and restrict car and taxi movements through some of the most severely affected areas. Nearly 14,000 people are under direct observation due to suspected exposure to the virus.³ Despite containment efforts and international warnings, the virus has already been found on four continents, including the United States.⁴

2019-nCoV is a new virus, related to SARS, which also causes severe acute respiratory infection, with no specific cure or vaccine. Although much about the progression of this virus remains unknown, symptoms seem to start with a fever, followed by a dry cough and then, in some patients leads to severe respiratory distress, shortness of breath, and hospitalization.⁵ Because the

¹ Griffiths, James. China goes into emergency mode as number of confirmed Wuhan coronavirus cases reaches 2,700. CNN. January 27, 2020 updates 8:08 AM. Accessed: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/26/asia/wuhan-coronavirus-update-intl-hnk/index.html>

² BBC News. China coronavirus spread is accelerating, Xi Jinping warns. January 26, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51249208>

³ Hung, Pien. Coronavirus Update: What’s New in the Evolving Outbreak NPR. January 25, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/01/25/799534953/coronavirus-update-whats-new-in-the-evolving-outbreak>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ BBC News. China coronavirus spread is accelerating, Xi Jinping warns. January 26, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51249208>

early symptoms of 2019-nCoV mimic the flu or common cold, it is expected that many will wait to seek medical care and in the meantime may expose others to this potentially dangerous virus.

Shortly after the Ebola virus emerged as a global health threat, the Obama administration created a White House global health security and biothreats directorate within the National Security Council.⁶ This position had direct access to the highest levels of government and its creation was an acknowledgement that tackling global pandemics necessitates a bigger U.S. policy authority and presence within the administration's security policymaking apparatus. Unfortunately, under your leadership this position was eliminated in 2018, and you have provided no clarity on who would be the lead voice and coordinator of the U.S. response to an infectious disease threat. This, compounded with your repeated efforts to starve resources put toward our global health preparedness, has threatened to put the U.S. in a precarious situation.

In this era with widespread travel, outbreaks are far more frequent and difficult to contain. Solutions require long-term strategy and investments and involve engagements with both private and public interests as well as an ability to communicate quickly and effectively with other heads of state. In the U.S., the response to a public health threat is spread across multiple agencies and to be effective requires far tighter coordination and unity of effort, both at home and abroad. Considerations of quarantines, travel restrictions, shortages of drugs and medical supplies as well as rapid public and diplomatic communications are all critical to protect the health and safety of Americans in the midst of an outbreak. Having a person with expertise leading a whole government response is of utmost importance.

The 2019 coronavirus is not the first, and will not be the last, biothreat the U.S. faces. The outcome will be inevitably better both for this outbreak and the next if we have in place a single qualified individual to help lead our global health efforts at the highest levels of our federal government. I call on you to reestablish this position, and appoint a qualified person to it as soon as possible, to help keep all of America safe.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

⁶ J. Stephen Morrison. Health Security Downgraded at the Whitehouse. Center for Strategic & International Studies. Commentary. June 28, 2018. Accessed: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/health-security-downgraded-white-house> and Lauren Weber. Sudden Departure of White House Global Health Security Head Has Experts Worried. HuffPost. May 9, 2018. Accessed: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/tim-ziemer-global-health-security-leaves_n_5af37dfbe4b0859d11d02290