

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

SELECT SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

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July 26, 2021

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30329

Dear Secretary Becerra and Director Walensky:

The Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis has been conducting investigations into the federal government's response to the coronavirus pandemic. We have sought to better understand what went wrong, identify ways to improve the country's response, and determine what corrective steps are necessary to ensure our nation is better prepared for any future public health crisis. These investigations have revealed, among other failures, that Trump Administration officials engaged in a persistent pattern of political interference in the nation's pandemic response—overruling and bullying our nation's scientists and making decisions that allowed the virus to spread more rapidly in an attempt to advance former President Trump's electoral prospects.¹ We therefore write to request transcribed interviews with key career officials at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in order to obtain additional relevant information.

¹ See, e.g., Letter from Chairman James E. Clyburn, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, to Chief of Staff Ronald A. Klain, White House (Feb. 8, 2021) (online at <https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/2021-02-08.Clyburn%20to%20Klain%20re%20WH%20Failures%20on%20Pandemic%20.pdf>); Letter from Chairman James E. Clyburn, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, to Secretary Alex M. Azar II, Department of Health and Human Services and Director Robert R. Redfield, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Dec. 21, 2020) (online at https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/2020-12-21.Clyburn%20to%20Redfield%20and%20Azar%20re%20Subpoena%20FINAL%20_0.pdf); Letter from Chairman James E. Clyburn, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, to Secretary Alex M. Azar II, Department of Health and Human Services and Director Robert R. Redfield, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Dec. 10, 2020) (online at <https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/2020-12-10.Clyburn%20to%20HHS%20re%20Redfield%20%281%29.pdf>).

The Select Subcommittee's investigations have demonstrated that the Trump Administration's response to the coronavirus pandemic is among the worst failures of leadership in American history.² The previous Administration made a series of critical failures that undermined the nation's ability to respond effectively to the pandemic. These missteps include failing to take sufficient action in the early months of 2020 to prepare for and respond to the coronavirus, designing and initially distributing a flawed coronavirus test, refusing to develop a coordinated national plan to contain the virus, and pursuing a haphazard and ineffective approach to procuring personal protective equipment and testing supplies.³

One of the most consequential failings of the Trump Administration's response was the repeated overruling and sidelining of top scientists and undermining of Americans' health for political purposes. By downplaying the threat of the coronavirus, allowing politics to infect public health guidance, and actively undermining the work of our nation's scientists, the previous Administration contributed to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Americans and the illness of millions more. Dr. Deborah Birx, the White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator during the Trump Administration, has acknowledged that countless American lives could have been saved if the previous Administration had implemented a more aggressive response: "There were about a hundred thousand deaths that came from that original surge. All of the rest of them, in my mind, could have been mitigated or decreased substantially."⁴

In an apparent attempt to hide the truth about the Trump Administration's failed pandemic response and repeated attempts to interfere with public health decisions for political gain, the previous Administration repeatedly obstructed the Select Subcommittee's inquiries last year. HHS engaged in dilatory tactics, withheld documents, and blocked CDC and HHS officials from providing critical information for months—refusing to make witnesses available for interviews about the Administration's political interference with the pandemic response until after Election Day. Following troubling testimony by a career CDC official that then-CDC Director Robert Redfield may have ordered staff to destroy evidence of political interference, the previous Administration abruptly canceled four scheduled interviews with other officials and refused to comply with the Select Subcommittee's request for a transcribed interview with Director Redfield about this incident.⁵

² See Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, *Inefficient, Ineffective, and Inequitable: The Trump Administration's Failed Response to the Coronavirus Crisis* (Oct. 2020) (online at <https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/InterimStaffReport10.30.20.pdf>).

³ See Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, *Inefficient, Ineffective, and Inequitable: The Trump Administration's Failed Response to the Coronavirus Crisis*, Appendix B (Oct. 2020) (online at <https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/InterimStaffReport10.30.20.pdf>); Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, *Hearing on Accountability In Crisis: GAO's Recommendations to Improve the Federal Coronavirus Response*, 116th Cong. (June 26, 2020) (online at <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VC/VC00/20200626/110831/HHRG-116-VC00-Transcript-20200626.pdf>).

⁴ *The Covid-19 War in the Trump White House*, CNN (Mar. 29, 2020) (online at www.cnn.com/2021/03/29/world/coronavirus-newsletter-intl-03-29-21/index.html).

⁵ See Letter from Chairman James E. Clyburn, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, to Secretary Alex M. Azar II, Department of Health and Human Services and Director Robert R. Redfield, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Dec. 21, 2020) (online at <https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/2020-12->

To date, the Select Subcommittee has identified at least 88 instances in which Trump Administration officials injected politics into public health decisions—including attempting to alter, delay, or block the release of scientific reports and guidance on the coronavirus, pressuring public health experts to adopt politically motivated talking points that downplayed the threat of the virus and conflicted with science, and seeking to retaliate against public health officials who provided truthful information to the public. These incidents degraded every major facet of the prior Administration’s public health response and severely hindered the country’s ability to respond effectively to the pandemic.⁶

Evidence previously uncovered by the Select Subcommittee and other sources shows that Trump Administration officials sought to make changes to public health guidance related to the coronavirus for political reasons.⁷ For example, in late May 2020, the Trump White House altered CDC’s guidance to faith communities to remove a recommendation to limit choir singing because officials “did not want to alienate the evangelical community.”⁸ Following the changes, CDC’s Deputy Director of Infectious Diseases Jay Butler reportedly wrote to his colleagues: “I am very troubled on this Sunday morning that there will be people who will get sick and perhaps die because of what we were forced to do.”⁹ In a subsequent review completed by then-CDC Principal Deputy Director Anne Schuchat in March 2021, CDC confirmed that multiple public health guidance documents related to the coronavirus pandemic were not “primarily

21.Clyburn%20to%20Redfield%20and%20Azar%20re%20Subpoena%20FINAL%20_0.pdf); Letter from Chairman James E. Clyburn, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, to Secretary Alex. M. Azar II, Department of Health and Human Services and Director Robert R. Redfield, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Dec. 10, 2020) (online at <https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/2020-12-10.Clyburn%20to%20HHS%20re%20Redfield%20%281%29.pdf>).

⁶ Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, *The Trump Administration’s Pattern of Political Interference in the Nation’s Coronavirus Response* (July 26, 2021) (online at <https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/7.26.2021%20Timeline%20of%20Political%20Interference%20-%20final.pdf>); Letter from Chairman James E. Clyburn, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, to Acting Secretary Norris Cochran, Department of Health and Human Services (Feb. 8, 2021) (online at <https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/2021-02-08.Clyburn%20to%20Cochran%20re%20WH%20Failures%20on%20Pandemic%20.pdf>).

⁷ See, e.g., Letter from Chairman James E. Clyburn, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, to Acting Secretary Norris Cochran, Department of Health and Human Services (Feb. 8, 2021) (online at <https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/2021-02-08.Clyburn%20to%20Cochran%20re%20WH%20Failures%20on%20Pandemic%20.pdf>).

⁸ *White House and CDC Remove Coronavirus Warnings About Choirs in Faith Guidance*, Washington Post (May 28, 2020) (online at www.washingtonpost.com/health/white-house-and-cdc-remove-coronavirus-warnings-about-choirs-in-faith-guidance/2020/05/28/5d9c526e-a117-11ea-9590-1858a893bd59_story.html); *Inside the Fall of the CDC*, ProPublica (Oct. 15, 2020) (online at www.propublica.org/article/inside-the-fall-of-the-cdc); *CDC Quickly Changed Its Guidance on Limiting Choirs at Religious Services*, National Public Radio (May 29, 2020) (online at www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/29/865324310/cdc-quickly-changed-its-guidance-on-limiting-choirs-at-religious-services).

⁹ *Inside the Fall of the CDC*, ProPublica (Oct. 15, 2020) (online at www.propublica.org/article/inside-the-fall-of-the-cdc).

authored by CDC staff,” used “less directive language than ... could be supported by existing evidence,” and were not supported by the latest science.¹⁰

Political appointees attempted to alter or block at least 13 scientific reports related to the coronavirus as outlined in documents previously released by the Select Subcommittee.¹¹ For instance, on June 5, 2020, former HHS Senior Advisor Paul Alexander sought to insert language into a CDC study related to coronavirus prevention. HHS Deputy Assistant Secretary Bill Hall, the top career official in HHS’s Public Affairs Office, responded by explaining that, “as matter of long-standing policy, we do not engage in clearing scientific articles, as that arena needs to remain an independent process.”¹² Despite this admonishment, Dr. Alexander continued his attempts to alter CDC’s scientific reports.¹³

Documents previously released by the Select Subcommittee show that political appointees sought to promote positive news about the pandemic and downplay coronavirus risks to the American people.¹⁴ For example, in June 2020, Dr. Alexander urged then-HHS Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Michael Caputo, HHS Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Mark Weber, and other HHS staff to release more “positive statements” supporting the Administration’s pandemic response and to message that “the vast overwhelming majority will be fine...just fine...will not even know they got COVID.”¹⁵ Mr. Caputo later delegated a

¹⁰ Memorandum from Anne Schuchat, Principal Deputy Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to Rochelle P. Walensky, Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Summary of Guidance Review (Mar. 10, 2021) (online at [hwww.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/communication/Guidance-Review.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/communication/Guidance-Review.pdf)).

¹¹ Letter from Chairman James E. Clyburn, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, to Secretary Alex M. Azar II, Department of Health and Human Services and Director Robert R. Redfield, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Dec. 21, 2020) (online at https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/2020-12-21.Clyburn%20to%20Redfield%20and%20Azar%20re%20Subpoena%20FINAL%20_0.pdf).

¹² Email from Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Bill Hall, Department of Health and Human Services, to Senior Advisor Paul Alexander, Department of Health and Human Services, et al. (June 5, 2020) (SSCC-0007790 – 92) (online at https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/2020.06.05%20SSCC-0007790-92_Redacted.pdf) (emphasis added).

¹³ Memorandum from Majority Staff to Members, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, *Supplemental Memorandum on Investigation into Political Interference with Coronavirus Response* (Dec. 16, 2020) (online at <https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/Staff%20Report%20re%20Political%20Messaging%20and%20Herd%20Immunity.pdf>).

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Email from Senior Advisor Paul Alexander, Department of Health and Human Services, to Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Michael Caputo, Department of Health and Human Services, et al. (June 15, 2020) (SSCC-0007320 – 21) (online at https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/2020.06.15%20SSCC-007320-21_Redacted.pdf).

massive advertising campaign to Mr. Weber, which was designed to “defeat despair and inspire hope” amid the coronavirus pandemic and was set to launch just weeks before the election.¹⁶

Trump Administration officials also sought to suppress accurate scientific information and attempted to retaliate against officials who provided truthful information to the public.¹⁷ For instance, in July 2020, Mr. Caputo threatened CDC staff after learning that a senior CDC scientist was interviewed about the Administration’s decision to strip CDC of its longstanding role in collecting hospital data without his personal permission. CDC Deputy Communications Director Kate Galatas sought assistance from Director Redfield, Dr. Schuchat, HHS’s Deputy Chief Counsel, and others in responding to Mr. Caputo, stating in one email: “I see this as a pattern of hostile and threatening behavior directed at me, Michelle [Bonds, Director of CDC’s Division of Public Affairs], and communication staff at CDC.”¹⁸ The Select Subcommittee previously scheduled an interview with Ms. Galatas, but it was canceled by the Trump Administration.¹⁹

¹⁶ *‘It’s Like Every Red Flag’: Trump-Ordered HHS Ad Blitz Raises Alarms*, Politico (Sept. 25, 2020) (online at www.politico.com/news/2020/09/25/trump-hhs-ads-coronavirus-421957); *see also* Letter from Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney, Committee on Oversight and Reform; Chairman James Clyburn, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis; and Chairman Raja Krishnamoorthi, Economic and Consumer Policy Subcommittee, to Secretary Alex M. Azar II, Department of Health and Human Services (Sept. 10, 2020) (online at <https://oversight.house.gov/sites/democrats.oversight.house.gov/files/2020-09-10.CBM%20JEC%20RK%20to%20Azar-HHS%20re%20Defeat%20Despair%20Contract.pdf>); Letter from Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney, Committee on Oversight and Reform; Chairman James Clyburn, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis; and Chairman Raja Krishnamoorthi, Economic and Consumer Policy Subcommittee to the Secretary Alex M. Azar II, Department of Health and Human Services (Oct. 28, 2020) (online at <https://oversight.house.gov/sites/democrats.oversight.house.gov/files/2020-10-28.CBM%20Clyburn%20RK%20to%20Azar-%20HHS%20re%20Advertising%20Campaign%20Contract.pdf>).

¹⁷ *See, e.g.*, Letter from Chairman James E. Clyburn, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, to Secretary Alex M. Azar II, Health and Human Services and Director Robert R. Redfield, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Dec. 21, 2020) (online at https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/2020-12-21.Clyburn%20to%20Redfield%20and%20Azar%20re%20Subpoena%20FINAL%20_0.pdf); Memorandum from Majority Staff to Members, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, Supplemental Memorandum on Investigation into Political Interference with Coronavirus Response (Dec. 16, 2020) (online at <https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/Staff%20Report%20re%20Political%20Messaging%20and%20Herd%20Immunity.pdf>).

¹⁸ Email from Deputy Communications Director Kate Galatas, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to Director Robert R. Redfield, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, et al. (July 17, 2020) (SSCCManual-000190 – 95) (online at https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/2020.07.17%20SSCCManual-000190-95_Redacted.pdf); Email from Deputy Communications Director Kate Galatas, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to Principal Deputy Director Anne Schuchat, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, et al. (July 17, 2020) (SSCCManual-000174 – 79) (online at https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/2020.07.17%20SSCCManual-000174-79_Redacted_0.pdf).

¹⁹ Letter from Chairman James E. Clyburn, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, to Secretary Alex. M. Azar II, Department of Health and Human Services and Director Robert R. Redfield, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Dec. 10, 2020) (online at <https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/2020-12-10.Clyburn%20to%20HHS%20re%20Redfield%20%281%29.pdf>).

The Select Subcommittee previously uncovered evidence that senior Trump appointees may have sought to conceal and destroy evidence of political interference, including an August 8, 2020, email in which Dr. Alexander demanded that CDC alter or rescind truthful scientific reports he believed were damaging to President Trump.²⁰ A recently obtained document indicates that top CDC officials—including then-CDC Director Redfield and Dr. Michael Iademarco, Director of CDC’s Center for Surveillance, Epidemiology, and Laboratory Services—were contacted by Dr. Christine Casey, Editor of CDC’s MMWR series, on the morning of August 9 to “discuss next steps” with respect to Dr. Alexander’s email.²¹ During a December 7, 2020, transcribed interview of Dr. Charlotte Kent, Chief of the Scientific Publications Branch and Editor-in-Chief of CDC’s MMWR series, Dr. Kent stated that she was instructed to delete Dr. Alexander’s email on August 9, and that she understood the direction came from Dr. Redfield following a discussion about the email with Dr. Iademarco earlier that morning.²²

* * *

Career officials at CDC and HHS were actively involved in matters under investigation by the Select Subcommittee and likely possess material information relevant to the Select Subcommittee’s investigations. This may include, but may not be not limited to, information on the early monitoring of and response to the coronavirus; the factors causing CDC’s early coronavirus tests to fail; federal public health policies developed in response to the coronavirus; coronavirus testing, treatments, or vaccines; consideration of a herd immunity strategy or allowing the virus to spread among any portion of the U.S. population prior to the development and distribution of a vaccine; public messaging related to the coronavirus; the extent and impact of the political interference in public health agencies’ work; any effort to delete, conceal, or withhold information, documents, or testimony; data collection practices; or any adverse employment action taken or considered against any employee, official, or contractor of the federal government for actions taken in the course of their employment related to the coronavirus.

²⁰ See Letter from Chairman James E. Clyburn, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, to Secretary Alex M. Azar II, Department of Health and Human Services and Director Robert R. Redfield, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Dec. 10, 2020) (online at <https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/2020-12-10.Clyburn%20to%20HHS%20re%20Redfield%20%281%29.pdf>).

²¹ Email from Staff, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to Director Robert R. Redfield, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, et al. (Aug. 9, 2020) (SSCC-0022285 – 86) (online at <https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/Link%201%20-%20New%20CDC%20Email%20to%20Redfield.pdf>).

²² See Letter from Chairman James E. Clyburn, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, to Secretary Alex M. Azar II, Department of Health and Human Services and Director Robert R. Redfield, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Dec. 10, 2020) (online at <https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/2020-12-10.Clyburn%20to%20HHS%20re%20Redfield%20%281%29.pdf>).

Our public health institutions must never again be compromised by decision makers more concerned with politics than keeping Americans safe. It is therefore imperative that the Select Subcommittee's investigations into the prior Administration's response to the pandemic provide full accountings of what occurred.

For all of these reasons, the Select Subcommittee requests transcribed interviews with the following individuals on the dates listed below:

- Bill Hall, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, HHS, August 23, 2021, at 9:00 a.m.
- Mark Weber, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, HHS, August 24, 2021, at 9:00 a.m.
- Kate Galatas, Deputy Director for Communications, CDC, August 30, 2021, 9:00 a.m.
- Christine Casey, Editor, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, CDC, August 31, 2021, 9:00 a.m.
- Michael Iademarco, Director of Center for Surveillance, Epidemiology, and Laboratory Services, CDC, September 1, 2021, 9:00 a.m.
- Jay Butler, Deputy Director of Infectious Diseases, CDC, September 2, 2021, 9:00 a.m.

These requests are consistent with the House of Representatives' authorization of the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis "to conduct a full and complete investigation" of "issues related to the coronavirus crisis," including the "preparedness for and response to the coronavirus crisis" and "executive branch policies, deliberations, decisions, activities, and internal and external communications related to the coronavirus crisis."²³

Please confirm by August 4, 2021, that these individuals will appear voluntarily for transcribed interviews on the dates requested. If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact Select Subcommittee staff at (202) 225-4400.

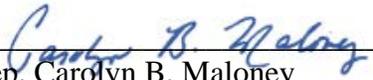
Sincerely,


Rep. James E. Clyburn
Chairman


Rep. Maxine Waters

²³ H.Res. 8, sec. 4(f), 117th Cong. (2021); H.Res. 935, 116th Cong. (2020).

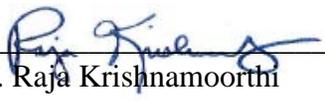
The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky
Page 8


Rep. Carolyn B. Maloney


Rep. Nydia M. Velázquez


Rep. Bill Foster


Rep. Jamie Raskin


Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi

cc: The Honorable Steve Scalise, Ranking Member