

**COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515**

September 24, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Azar,

We write to request information regarding the decision by the Trump Administration to thwart an effort that would have mailed reusable face masks to every American household during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. This Administration's failure to take actions that could have slowed the spread of the coronavirus, such as promoting broader reliance on face masks, continues to have fatal consequences for communities across the nation.

Thousands of documents recently obtained under the Freedom of Information Act highlight missed opportunities by this Administration to contain COVID-19 and save the lives of thousands of Americans. One of these documents is a draft press release from the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) describing an initiative with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to send five reusable face masks to every American household in April 2020. The initiative would have delivered 650 million masks in total, starting with those in the most hard-hit communities. Press reports indicate that the White House decided to reject this approach of sending face masks directly to families, instead choosing a more cumbersome and slower process to distribute masks to nonprofit organizations as well as state and federal agencies.

As you know, this Administration continues to put forth conflicting messages regarding the need for Americans to wear face masks that scientists have shown can help prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Initially, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advised the American public against wearing face masks, but later reversed this guidance. President Trump has repeatedly mocked the use of face masks while hiding safely within his cocoon of frequent required testing for each person around him. He also casts doubt on statements from other Administration officials highlighting the efficacy of face masks for the protection of the general public who suffer from inadequate access to tests and a failed testing strategy. The result of these mixed messages is that wearing face masks to stem the spread of the coronavirus has become needlessly divisive and has led to unnecessary deaths.

The American people deserve a federal government united in its mission to keep them and their families safe amidst this unprecedented pandemic. Rather than rely on the unique reach of the USPS to send masks directly to American households when it would have mattered most, this Administration instead has been consumed with its efforts to sabotage the USPS, potentially delaying people from getting their medicine, paying bills, or casting their vote by mail. Furthermore, the patchwork approach the Administration relied upon to distribute masks through various other channels, including nonprofits likely already stretched particularly thin amidst the pandemic, is emblematic of this Administration's chaotic response to the pandemic more broadly.

Accordingly, we request that you provide responses to the following by no later than October 1, 2020:

- 1) Why did the Administration abandon its plan to send every American household reusable face masks through the USPS earlier this spring?
- 2) Please provide the names and titles of any HHS employees or any other Administration official involved in the consideration of whether to send reusable face masks to American households through the USPS.
- 3) After rejecting the plan to distribute face masks to American households, what methodology and data did HHS subsequently rely upon to supports its allocation of face masks across the country? Please provide any memoranda or analyses describing HHS's methodology to distribute these face masks.
- 4) Did HHS coordinate with nonprofit organizations prior to sending them face masks to ensure that such entities had adequate capacity, including on-site staff, to provide face masks directly to American families?

Thank you for your prompt attention to this critical matter.

Sincerely,



Richard E. Neal, *Chairman*
Committee on Ways and Means



Bill Pascrell, Jr., *Chairman*
Subcommittee on Oversight