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February 27, 2020

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Comptroller Dodaro,

We are writing to ask the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to investigate reports that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is deploying human services staff without appropriate training or protective gear to interact directly with individuals exposed to coronavirus in quarantine. These same employees then returned to the community without instructions relating to the potential spread of the virus to the public, despite the inappropriate exposure to coronavirus. If the reports are correct, management decisions at HHS could have contributed to the spread of the virus within the United States.

We were alarmed to learn from a whistleblower that HHS has deployed human services workers, without training or experience in public health crises, outbreaks, or pandemics—including some staff from the U.S. Repatriation Program within our Committee's jurisdiction—to interact with Americans evacuated because of coronavirus outbreaks. Further, top management dismissed concerns from managers and affected employees about their actions.

The whistleblower alleges that staff were sent into quarantined areas “without personal protective equipment, training, or experience in managing public health emergencies, safety protocols, and the potential danger to both themselves and members of the public they come into contact with.” We believe these potentially exposed HHS employees have subsequently been interacting with the public, including taking commercial air flights and returning home to their families, without being tested for coronavirus or taking any other precautions. We are deeply troubled that HHS seems to have ignored valid public health concerns, and also about the reports that HHS immediately retaliated against the whistleblower instead of taking action to protect its staff and the public from being exposed to a potentially fatal virus.

The Repatriation Program, which is authorized in Section 1113 of the Social Security Act,¹ allows HHS to spend up to \$1 million each year on case management services for Americans who are forced to leave foreign countries and need assistance when they return. It normally serves around 600 individuals each year, but Congress has occasionally lifted the funding cap for mass repatriation related to war or natural disaster. The program typically plays no role in responding to mass health events, and there was no reason to believe that staff or managers in this program would have any training in preventing the spread of an infectious disease or would even fully understand the risks involved for them and for the public.

The Administration requested an additional \$9 million for the Repatriation Program as part of the coronavirus supplemental funding request, which we worry signals a plan to expand the dangerous use of non-public health staff to respond to a public health crisis. We are writing for more information about how widespread the practice of exposing HHS staff without training or protective equipment to coronavirus has been, any plans the agency has to expand the use of human services staff to respond to public health crises, and your recommendations for reducing the danger to public servants and the public.

We respectfully request that you report to the Committee on the status and findings of this investigation within one week. Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



The Honorable Richard E. Neal
Chairman



The Honorable Jimmy Gomez

¹ Codified at 42 U.S.C. § 1313, see regulations at 45 C.F.R. § 212.