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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

GABRIELLE D'ADAMO SINGER, STAFF DIRECTOR
DAVID M. WEINBERG, MINORITY STAFF DIRECTOR

May 29, 2020

The Honorable Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

We write to request the Government Accountability Office (GAO) examine the federal government's response to the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States, and develop recommendations to improve the nation's preparedness for a future pandemic or public health emergency based on the federal response and experience with this outbreak. This examination should consider all aspects of the crisis, including, but not limited to, federal efforts to provide state, local, and tribal governments with resources and information to combat the outbreak, the effect of federal programs and funds on supporting local economies, the impact on the federal workforce, and the role regulations played in prevention, response, and recovery.

Given the significant impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on our nation's health and economy, it is critical that GAO use its investigative and oversight expertise to perform a comprehensive review of the federal government's response to this pandemic so we are better prepared for future events. As leaders of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Regulatory Affairs and Federal Management, which has oversight of the effectiveness and efficiency of federal programs, we know it is critical to broadly examine this crisis so we can learn from both our mistakes and successes.

Your review should examine all aspects of the crisis, including pre-existing programs to track and mitigate the health and economic effects of a pandemic, the preparations of the federal government to address global pandemics, the disbursement of federal funds and resources starting on December 31, 2019, the impact of the pandemic on the health, economy, and public and private institutions of the United States, and the effectiveness of federal efforts to help those same institutions deal with and recover from the outbreak. As part of your review, we ask you to specifically examine the following issues:

- The adequacy of pre-existing capabilities and programs within the federal government to identify, track, and mitigate the health and economic effects of the pandemic
- The effects of federal regulatory requirements on the response to and recovery from the pandemic
- How federal regulatory requirements can promote preparedness for a future pandemic

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- The effectiveness of strategies utilized by federal agencies to protect the federal workforce through increased use of telework, weather and safety leave, and other means
- The preparedness of the federal government to confront the COVID-19 outbreak and provide state, local, tribal, and private entities with resources and information to prepare for the crisis
- The efficiency and effectiveness of the disbursement of federal funds and resources starting on December 31, 2019 to state, local, and tribal governments, as well as federal grantees
- The efficiency and effectiveness of the disbursement of federal funds and resources starting on December 31, 2019 to assist private institutions and businesses in responding to and recovering from the pandemic, including actions taken by the Federal Reserve, U.S. Department of the Treasury, and Small Business Administration, and an analysis of whether other economic stability tools, including pandemic risk insurance, would better mitigate the economic fallout from a future pandemic
- Federal agency flexibilities that were available to allow agencies to effectively and efficiently respond to the COVID-19 crisis
- Federal efforts to respond to requests from state, local, and tribal governments and the health care system for COVID-19 diagnostic tests, specimen collection kits, and personal protective equipment (PPE). This should include a timeline and breakdown by state of how many CDC test kits, supplies, and PPE requests were supplied by the federal government, and an analysis of federal efforts to coordinate purchases of necessary PPE or distribute them from the Strategic National Stockpile
- Federal guidance and assistance to states and municipalities regarding the implementation of social distancing, quarantines, testing guidelines, contact tracing, and related efforts, as well as federal guidance on the easing of such restrictions
- How the federal government could have better coordinated the distribution of medically necessary supplies by, for example, making large-scale purchases, instituting rapid distribution methods, not competing with hospitals and states with requests to the same vendors, and scaling up domestic production of needed supplies
- The capacity of domestic suppliers and manufacturers to meet the needs of federal, state, and local governments, as well as private industry, for supplies, including PPE, related to COVID-19 response and mitigation
- Federal agency continuity of operations plans and strategies to ensure the public was still able to access essential services during the crisis
- The evacuation of Americans from overseas during the pandemic, including the coordination of evacuation efforts with private entities and public messaging on travel restrictions and country conditions
- Decisions made by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on the disbursement of federal funding and their consultation process with tribal nations or the CDC Tribal Advisory Committee
- The interaction between federal entities tasked with taking a lead role in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the effect of this interaction on state, local, tribal, and private organizations seeking information and assistance regarding the outbreak

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- Analysis of the federal government's information-sharing efforts with state, local, tribal, and private organizations seeking assistance on how to best manage the outbreak

As part of this review, GAO should examine all necessary federal agencies regarding their involvement in the preparation for and response to the COVID-19 outbreak. This examination should review agencies' use of funds specifically provided to respond to the pandemic and the effect of those funds on limiting the spread of the outbreak. This review of federal agencies should include a specific emphasis on the following entities:

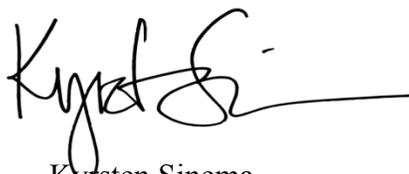
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Food and Drug Administration, National Institutes for Health, and Indian Health Service
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency
- Executive Office of the President, including the Office of Management and Budget
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
- U.S. Department of State
- U.S. Department of Agriculture
- U.S. Department of Education

We appreciate your attention to these important matters and look forward to your response. Please follow up with Eric Bursch on Senator Sinema's staff at eric_bursch@hsgac.senate.gov with any additional questions.

Sincerely,



James Lankford
Chairman
Subcommittee on Regulatory
Affairs and Federal
Management



Kyrsten Sinema
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Regulatory
Affairs and Federal
Management