

July 20, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Azar,

We are writing to you on behalf of the Council of Academic Family Medicine (CAFM) which collectively includes family medicine medical school and residency faculty, community preceptors, residency program directors, medical school department chairs, research scientists, and others involved in family medicine education.

As medical professionals, educators and researchers we offer the perspective of individuals whose careers are based on the use of evidence in medical decision-making. As physicians and other clinical members of the primary care teams we write to ask your support for the Centers of Disease Control (CDC). Our members have been on the forefront of efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has caused an unprecedented upheaval in our health system. In each sphere of care, new pressures and changes have required innovation and adaptation. We count on the CDC to provide the data-based recommendations that help us provide care to our patients and communities. It was created as a nonpartisan entity to tackle public health crises like the one we're facing today, and track data related to these crises. As academicians, and especially as teachers of future generations of physicians, we need to be able to steer our learners to an evidence-based, non-partisan institution that they can trust for direction and guidance in times of public health emergencies. We have seen in recent years the dwindling of the public health infrastructure, leading primary care to fill in the gap of helping communities develop testing protocols, drive through testing sites, and more, to help our communities cope with the effects of the pandemic.

It is extremely discouraging to see the work of the CDC undermined in public in recent months. From multiple statements that the CDC only "provides guidance," which can be adopted or not, to the relaxing guidelines published by the CDC on how to "open our economy" as well as ones devoted to opening back schools, to the announcement just a few days ago that COVID-19 data should no longer be sent to the CDC, but to another area of HHS (TeleTracking™ <https://teletracking.protect.hhs.gov>), we are seeing an erosion in our ability to trust that the work of the CDC is not being influenced by political consideration. These alterations in the CDC's work have raised concern about the scientific integrity of it as an institution. As such, it serves our nation poorly.

There is doubtless a need to upgrade our public health data infrastructure and particularly the CDC. We challenge the Administration's lack of support for the institution, lack of efforts to improve it, and its effort to undermine its influence. Healthy People 2020ⁱ has described three key components necessary to build a strong public health infrastructure: a capable and qualified workforce, up-to-date data and information systems, and agencies capable of assessing and responding to public health needs. We ask for your support to make the financial investment required to bolster the work of the CDC, rather than curtail its effectiveness through active neglect.

The CDC has been known world-wide as the preeminent public health organization – one that has served as the template for such organizations around the world. We encourage you to support efforts to buttress the work of the CDC, rather than sabotage its name and damage its reputation, making it ineffective. It behooves us as a nation and the world at large to make every effort to keep it as the renowned institution it has been.

As we continue to fight this pandemic, we need to evaluate what has gone wrong and what has been right in our national response. We need to use those insights to provide a commitment to invest in our public health infrastructure, including the CDC and state and local public health offices. This is a pivotal moment in our nation's efforts to respond to this and future epidemics. The CDC needs to play a central role in those efforts.

We ask you to publicly support an increased investment in public health, through the CDC and other state and local public health entities and reinforce and restore the trustworthiness of the CDC and the experts that work there as an evidence-based institution.

Thank you for considering our requests. If you have questions, please contact Hope Wittenberg, Director, Government Relations at 703-731-8200 or hwittenberg@stfm.org.

Sincerely,



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Sent by email to Secretary@HHS.gov, with cc to HHSIEA@hhs.gov