

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

COMMITTEES:
APPROPRIATIONS
COMMERCE
HEALTH, EDUCATION,
LABOR, AND PENSIONS

June 9, 2020

The Honorable Robert R. Redfield
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road Atlanta, GA, 30329

Dear Director Redfield:

For months, I have called on the Trump Administration for a national COVID-19 testing strategy that provides clear guidance and metrics to states and localities. The information that testing provides plays a vital role in our response to the pandemic. We cannot identify or track and trace existing cases, or recognize new hotspots, without a robust testing infrastructure and the transparency in reported test results needed to ensure that communities can respond appropriately. But these calls have largely been ignored. I write to express my serious concerns with state and federal reporting of COVID-19 public health data, including critical testing data, and urge the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to take immediate corrective action.

In the midst of a pandemic and national crisis, the Trump Administration has failed once again to provide leadership, leaving states without guidance or metrics for reporting consistent and transparent public health data that can and should inform our response to COVID-19. Some state officials have reportedly altered or hidden critical public health data, misconstruing testing numbers and death tallies. Furthermore, it appears that even our own federal agencies have failed to clearly and accurately share data with the American public. This complete lack of coordination and communication is emblematic of the Administration's larger response to COVID-19 and puts all of us at risk as states seek to reopen.

In April, the *Tampa Bay Times* reported on inconsistencies in the death counts released by the Florida Department of Health and the state's medical examiner.¹ Later that same month, it was reported that the state had stopped releasing the list of coronavirus deaths being compiled by

¹ <https://www.tampabay.com/news/health/2020/04/11/floridas-count-of-coronavirus-deaths-is-missing-some-cases/>

Florida's medical examiner.² In Georgia, public health officials were forced to correct their COVID-19 testing numbers after it was reported that more than 14 percent of the state's total reported tests were antibody tests, which measure if an individual has ever been infected with the virus, and do not measure active infections.³ The state of Virginia was forced to issue a similar correction.⁴ New Jersey and Illinois have both been criticized for their handling of death counts in long-term care facilities. In total, according to recent reporting from *Politico*, at least a dozen states have inflated testing numbers or deflated death tallies by changing criteria for who counts as a coronavirus victim and what counts as a coronavirus test.⁵

Widespread reporting indicates that your agency has similarly failed to provide a fulsome picture of COVID-19 testing data, and concerns are mounting in regards to the handling of death counts. In early May, the CDC published its COVID Data Tracker, which for the first time included information on COVID-19 testing on a state-by-state basis.⁶ Shortly thereafter, an analysis by *The Atlantic* found that there were major discrepancies between CDC's numbers and numbers reported by states' health departments.⁷ Four days later, it was reported that the CDC had combined results from COVID-19 viral tests with antibody tests, despite webpages that indicated that data "only represent viral tests".⁸ The CDC's COVID Data Tracker now states that "Totals may include antibody tests from some states" and CDC has committed to begin reporting the two types of tests separately in the coming weeks. Even more concerning, additional reporting indicates that the White House may have pressured CDC to revise its COVID-19 death counts.⁹

The publication of misleading information is either demonstrative of utter incompetence, or part of an intentional effort to mislead the American public about our nation's ability to monitor, respond to, and understand the threat of COVID-19. Results from viral tests and antibody tests cannot and should not be equated, and it is irresponsible of the CDC to fail to be clear about the distinction. As we respond to current outbreaks and prepare communities for new hotspots, we must have the information necessary to instruct a robust response. CDC must immediately issue specific guidance to states with instructions for reporting public health data on COVID-19, including testing. This guidance must include a distinction between viral and antibody tests, and directions for separating results, as well as a specific definition of "probable" deaths from COVID-19 and a requirement that states report such information to the CDC.

As of last week, every state has now moved forward in efforts to reopen various aspects of their economies. In Wisconsin, we are eager to get folks back to work and continue building our state's economy, but we need support from public health experts and public health data that is

² <https://www.tampabay.com/news/health/2020/04/29/florida-medical-examiners-were-releasing-coronavirus-death-data-the-state-made-them-stop/>

³ <https://www.ledger-enquirer.com/news/coronavirus/article242884466.html>

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-antibody-covid-19-tests-northam-reopening/2020/05/14/fa9f62b0-95e4-11ea-82b4-c8db161ff6e5_story.html

⁵ <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/27/bad-state-coronavirus-data-trump-reopening-286143>

⁶ <https://www.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/>

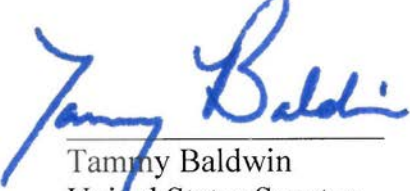
⁷ <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/05/cdc-publishing-covid-19-test-data/611764/>

⁸ <https://web.archive.org/web/20200518050707/https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/testing-in-us.html>

⁹ <https://www.axios.com/trump-coronavirus-death-toll-d8ba60a4-316b-4d1e-8595-74970c15fb34.html>

consistent, reliable, and informative. I look forward to working with you to ensure that state and federal agencies are providing clear and accurate data, including critical testing data.

Sincerely,



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator