

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 27, 2020

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

We write to express concern with your administration's supplemental funding request to respond to the rapidly evolving 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. Not only does your allocation of \$2.5 billion pale in comparison to the billions that public health experts have called for, but the limited details that you have provided indicate that your request will divert funds from programs—including the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)—that are critical to the health and well-being of our constituents.

On January 9, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that a novel coronavirus was identified and associated with an outbreak of pneumonia in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. Since then, the number of suspected cases rose drastically across the globe with over 82,500 cases confirmed to be infected and over 2,800 deaths to date.¹ The United States is among 47 countries impacted by COVID-19, reporting 15 cases detected in the United States and 45 cases among people repatriated from Wuhan City and the Diamond Princess Cruise Ship.² Just yesterday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported the first case of COVID-19 without a history of traveling to China or coming into contact with another known patient with the virus. This first reported case of "community spread" of COVID-19 echoes what CDC officials stated and you agreed with at yesterday's press conference on the coronavirus: we do expect more cases of the coronavirus in the United States, and now is the time to prepare.

Unfortunately, your requests for funding and transfers to address the outbreak of COVID-19 are intentionally vague and woefully inadequate to prepare and respond to this emerging public health emergency. For example, on February 3, 2020, you notified Congress that you would be transferring up to \$136 million in funds for efforts to address COVID-19. At the time, we received almost no other details regarding this transfer. We now know, *more than two weeks later*, that your administration intends to divert this amount from programs that are critical to the health and well-being of Minnesotans and Wisconsinites.

Notably, you requested to transfer over \$37 million from the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) to respond to COVID-19. LIHEAP recipients are often our most vulnerable, with 46 percent of households including seniors, 52 percent including a disabled

¹ <https://gisanddata.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/27/world/coronavirus-news.html> and <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-in-us.html>

family member, and 36 percent including children.³ In states like Minnesota and Wisconsin, which are home to some of the coldest winters in the country, the ability to heat our homes is a health and safety issue. In rural areas, this aid is even more impactful. Communities in Greater Minnesota received almost 70 percent of assistance despite containing only 45 percent of the state's population.⁴

Your administration, which has sought to cut LIHEAP every year that you have been in office, is attempting to weaken this critical source of support for families at a time when the program is already overburdened. In Minnesota, 315,000 people benefit from LIHEAP-funded assistance, and that is but a fraction of the need; only 20 percent of eligible households ultimately received assistance with their energy bills in 2017.⁵ Similarly, over 200,000 Wisconsin households receive assistance through LIHEAP—only a third of the eligible population. While the threat of coronavirus necessitates a swift and robust federal response, funding should not be taken from seniors, children, and people with disabilities who are simply trying to pay their heating bills.

Compounding this cruelty, many of the transfers outlined in the document associated with your request on February 3, 2020, are nonsensical. You propose to transfer over \$5.2 million from the CDC, the agency leading our federal response to the novel coronavirus, in the middle of this public health emergency.⁶ You further propose to transfer nearly \$63 million from critical research at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and over \$4.8 million from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), including over \$3.9 million to address opioid use and other substance use disorders.⁷

On the evening of February 24, 2020, one day before Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Alex Azar was set to testify before Senate appropriators, we received another vague request from your administration indicating that you would be allocating \$2.5 billion in total resources for the response to COVID-19. This request includes only \$1.25 billion in new funding, which is paltry in comparison to what national public health leaders recommend. The former Deputy Assistant Secretary to the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR) called for \$15 billion to stop the spread of COVID-19 and treat patients in the face of a widespread outbreak.⁸ Earlier this week, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO), National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists (CSTE), and Association of Public Health Laboratories (APHL) requested that the administration and Congress pass a supplemental appropriations bill that would adequately respond to the COVID-19 outbreak.⁹ Based on their estimates, this would *initially* require \$3.1 billion in new funding, including \$2 billion for the CDC and \$1 billion for the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR).¹⁰

³ <https://neada.org/program-policy-reports/liheapsurvey/>

⁴ Minnesota Department of Commerce Report on Minnesota Weatherization Assistance Program.

⁵ <https://neuac.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/State-Sheet-FY19-Minnesota.pdf>

⁶ FY 2020 Secretary's Transfer for Coronavirus Response.

⁷ FY 2020 Secretary's Transfer for Coronavirus Response.

⁸ <https://twitter.com/ddiamond/status/1231971358441078788>

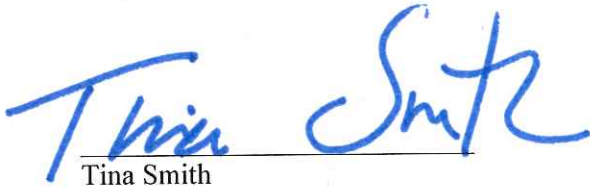
⁹ <https://www.naccho.org/uploads/downloadable-resources/Final-President-Letter-COVID-19-Supp-Letter.pdf>

¹⁰ Personal communication between CSTE and Senator Smith's office.


Furthermore, at this time, we have received no further details on this new request, and have not received any additional documentation on newly requested transfers. We are currently relying on a document that is over two weeks old to tell us how you intend to divert funds away from existing health priorities.

As we prepare to respond to the expected spread of COVID-19, we urge you to provide clarity in your proposals and to pursue a robust supplemental funding request that does not draw from funding for programs that help our constituents keep the heat on in their homes, pursue treatment for substance use disorders, and trust the federal government to invest in their overall health and well-being.

Sincerely,



Tina Smith
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator