

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

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

August 11, 2020

The Honorable Michael R. Pence  
Vice President of the United States  
Chair- White House Coronavirus Task Force  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, NW  
Washington, DC, 20500

Dear Mr. Vice President,

President Trump put you in charge of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, so I am writing with deep concerns about our ongoing testing supply shortages and the reported diversion of supplies from Wisconsin, even as your own taskforce has labeled our state a “hot spot” and we have just experienced, once again, a single-day record of new coronavirus cases.

On July 29, 2020, Advocate Aurora Health, a non-profit health care network of 15 hospitals and thousands of providers, issued a “Special COVID-19 Team Member Message” to staff in Wisconsin and Illinois.<sup>1</sup> The message, which was received by providers who have spent months caring for patients, including those suffering from COVID-19, detailed a new approach to testing. *“As the federal government redirects testing supplies to COVID-19 hot spots across the U.S., we are called to update our testing approach.”*

In Wisconsin, this means significantly limiting community testing and suspending pre-procedure testing for several surgical specialties, including orthopedics, gynecology, general surgery, urology, ophthalmology, gastrointestinal endoscopic procedures, otolaryngology, interventional radiology, and selective cardiology procedures. This amounts to thousands of patients per week who will go untested for COVID-19, potentially increasing their risk for morbidity and mortality when enduring an anesthetic and surgery, and creating the potential for the virus to spread.<sup>2</sup> Health care providers who have spent months working tirelessly in their communities to promote public health and provide care to those impacted by COVID-19 are now being asked to perform procedures on patients that have not been tested for coronavirus. This policy will put their lives at risk in and create the potential for outbreaks in the very places meant to protect us from the virus.

This pressing and perilous situation was created by the Trump Administration’s continued failure to increase our national production of supplies, put in place a national testing strategy, and provide states with the testing supplies to implement it. Furthermore, this follows a shameful track record of the Trump Administration ignoring requests for federal support from the state. I am urging the Coronavirus Task Force to make testing supplies, including reagent, available to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://advocateauroracombined.us.newsweaver.com/1apk1wgsno/ar61aiun25x>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.asahq.org/about-asa/newsroom/news-releases/2020/06/asa-and-apsf-joint-statement-on-perioperative-testing-for-the-covid-19-virus>

both public and private labs in the state of Wisconsin. In addition, given the continued supply chain chaos this administration has created, and lack of transparency regarding supply diversions, I am demanding that the Administration make public, in writing, all decisions made regarding continued supply diversions and the justification for such efforts, including all formulas used to prioritize various hotspots and make allocations.

This summer, the country has witnessed a surge in COVID-19 cases. Wisconsin, like so many other states, has seen its daily average of new cases and the percent of positive tests climb. Through the month of July, our state's seven-day average ticked upward, reaching a peak on July 26 at 930 new cases.<sup>3</sup> In a report from the Trump Administration dated July 26, Wisconsin was described as being "in the red zone for cases, indicating more than 100 new cases per 100,000 population last week, and the yellow zone for test positivity, indicating a rate between 5% to 10%."<sup>4</sup> This same report included recommendations, and advised that the state "encourage all individuals under age 40 that participated in large social gatherings or protests to be tested to prevent spread to vulnerable individuals in the community" and "surge testing and contact tracing resources to neighborhoods and zip codes with highest case rates."

These recommendations cannot be implemented without sufficient supplies and support from the White House. For months, I have requested that the Administration support the state of Wisconsin in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For months, our needs in Wisconsin have been ignored. Governor Evers and other leaders in the state have pursued innovative partnerships to increase access to testing, conducted widespread and effective outreach to communities experiencing outbreaks, and received national attention for early identification of health disparities associated with deaths from COVID-19.<sup>5</sup> But time and again, the Trump Administration has failed to deliver for Wisconsinites working tirelessly on the frontlines to combat this pandemic. Multiple health systems in the state have reported that suppliers, with which they have existing contracts, are not able to provide them with consistency in shipments of items such as reagent due to "diversions." When FEMA announced that it would begin shipments of certain supplies needed for testing to the state, many of the supplies were unusable, or contra-indicated for COVID-19 PCR testing.<sup>6</sup>

The recent announcement from Advocate Aurora is just the latest indicator of how the Trump Administration's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has failed my home state. In a press release dated August 5, the organization noted that like many providers, they were "forced to adjust our COVID-19 testing approach as testing supplies continue to be constrained and we experience a delay in anticipated shipments."<sup>7</sup> In Wisconsin, the organization will be "suspending testing before gastrointestinal endoscopic procedures, interventional radiology and selective cardiology procedures" and focusing only on testing patients that exhibit symptoms. This is a decision made out of desperation, reflective of a failed federal government response, which opens the door for asymptomatic spread of the virus in a hospital setting. As the American

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/covid-19/index.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/28/us/states-report-virus-response-july-26.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.propublica.org/article/early-data-shows-african-americans-have-contracted-and-died-of-coronavirus-at-an-alarming-rate>

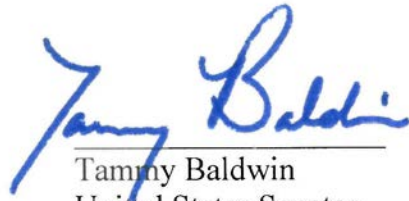
<sup>6</sup> <https://www.baldwin.senate.gov/press-releases/better-emergency-management-for-wisconsin>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.advocateaurorahealth.org/news/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-updates-from-advocate-aurora-health>

Society of Anesthesiologists and the Anesthesia Patient Safety Foundation noted in a joint statement “aerosolizing procedures place operating room staff at greater risk of being infected.” Instead of giving Wisconsin’s health systems the resources they need to respond to this virus, we are asking providers to place themselves and their communities at risk.

Let me be clear and put this in terms that I know you understand. The failure of leadership from the Trump Administration is resulting in a rationing of health care in Wisconsin and it is unacceptable. Months into this crisis, and we do not have enough supplies available in the state of Wisconsin for the widespread testing that is needed to monitor and contain the virus. Testing supplies must be made available now to states, including Wisconsin, and distributed in a transparent manner that is based on public health and science. I refuse to accept this White House abandoning my state by not providing us the testing supplies we need and diverting them elsewhere.

Sincerely,



Tammy Baldwin  
United States Senator