

July 2, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pence
Vice President of the United States
Chair, Coronavirus Task Force
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

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

Dear Vice President Pence and Secretary Azar:

The nation is under growing fatigue after months of stay-home orders, and millions of Americans' livelihoods depend on their ability to return to work. As a practical matter, we cannot expect the American people to tolerate new stay-home orders. Instead, I believe we must shift our approach to measuring hospital bed capacity and expand testing strategies.

To that end, I respectfully request that the administration take the necessary steps to ensure that all hospitals that accept Medicare payments provide timely reports on their bed capacity as well as COVID-19 patient populations. Specifically, hospitals should report the number of COVID-19 patients admitted to the hospital, the percent of those patients that are in an ICU setting, and the percent of the COVID-19 patients that are admitted for reasons apart from the coronavirus. I believe this information is vital to decision makers' ability to pinpoint dangerous hot spots and determine where additional resources may be needed.

While this approach will help measure hospital capacity, I believe we also must reassess our approach to testing individuals for COVID-19 to maximize time and resources. Adopting pool testing, which was previously carried out during the AIDS epidemic, could allow us to test up to five million people per day, according to Dr. Deborah Birx.

I applaud Dr. Birx and the entire Coronavirus Task Force (the Task Force) for their leadership in recognizing the benefits of transitioning to a pool testing strategy. Such a strategy could allow the nation to continue to reopen, with appropriate safety measures, by expanding testing capacity to more quickly identify infected individuals. Moreover, I believe pool testing can be effectively used in schools so that students are able to safely return to the classroom this fall, where they can gain from the well-documented benefits of in-person learning and socialization.

Congress is willing to work with the administration on this initiative, but we will need to work in unison with the Task Force. I ask that you provide a framework for developing a federal consortium of experts to implement a nationwide pool testing strategy in the immediate future.

This plan should include funding estimates to ensure pool testing can continue throughout the duration of the pandemic, so Congress can support your efforts.

Thank you for your attention to these important matters. Given the urgency of the pandemic, I ask for a response to these items by July 14, and look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Rubio', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Marco Rubio
U.S. Senator