

# United States Senate

May 15, 2020

The Honorable Peter Gaynor  
Administrator  
Federal Emergency Management Agency  
500 C Street SW  
Washington, DC 20472

The Honorable Alex Azar  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health and Human  
Services  
330 C St SW  
Washington, DC 20416

Dear Administrator Gaynor and Secretary Azar:

We are gravely concerned with recent reporting that President Trump and members of the Coronavirus Task Force are attempting to deflate the number of deaths attributed to COVID-19. As the Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the agency leading the All-of-America response to the pandemic, and the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the agency with expertise in tracking morbidity and mortality, it is incumbent on you to ensure an accurate and transparent death toll and consistent COVID-19 statistics.

On May 1, 2020, Senator Harris sent you a letter calling for an accurate COVID-19 death count during this pandemic. In that letter, she noted that a report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine on best practices for tracking significant morbidity and mortality during a disaster that was mandated by legislation enacted in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, is expected to be released later this year. However, because this pandemic necessitates federal guidance immediately in order to ensure an accurate death toll, the letter called on FEMA and HHS to work with the experts from the study to establish temporary federal protocols for counting and tracking COVID-19 morbidity and mortality. To date, Senator Harris has not heard back from either of your agencies.

Unfortunately, over the last two weeks, we have seen a misinformation campaign coming from the White House surrounding the COVID-19 death numbers, claiming the death count has been inflated. President Trump has publicly suggested that there are far fewer deaths than currently reported and reports indicate that administration officials asked Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) officials to exclude individuals from the official death count who were presumed positive or who may not have died as a direct result of contracting the virus.

Public health experts know this is a mistake and reporting indicates that officials inside the CDC pushed back against that request, claiming it could falsely skew the mortality rate at a time when

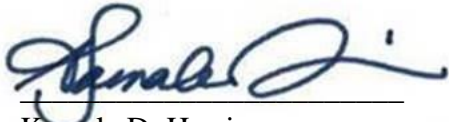
state and local governments are already struggling to accurately ensure that every person who dies as a result of COVID-19 is counted.

Additionally, federal scientists and doctors, including Dr. Anthony Fauci, the head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, have said the U.S. death toll is likely higher than is being reflected in government data sets. This is supported by examining the number of excess deaths this year compared to the same time period in previous years, which is remarkably higher than the current COVID-19 death count.

The misinformation surrounding the COVID-19 death count is not a new tactic from President Trump. This is the exact behavior that led to an extreme undercount in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. Without clear, unambiguous guidelines led by science and data on how to correctly count COVID-19 mortalities, inconsistent numbers and misinformation will impact government accountability, how resources will be allocated, and how we recover from this crisis.

We must have accurate, reliable information in order to successfully fight COVID-19. It is imperative that FEMA and HHS work with experts, including those involved in the National Academies study, to establish interim guidelines specifically for this pandemic and put an end to inconsistent data and messaging surrounding the COVID-19 death count. We look forward to hearing back as soon as possible on this pressing issue.

Sincerely,



Kamala D. Harris  
United States Senator

/s/ Richard Blumenthal

Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senator

/s/ Mazie K. Hirono

Mazie K. Hirono  
United States Senator

/s/ Edward J. Markey

Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator

/s/ Sherrod Brown

Sherrod Brown  
United States Senator