

United States Senate

April 10, 2020

Vice President of the United States Mike Pence
Eisenhower Executive Ofc. Bldg, W
Executive Ave NW,
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Vice President Pence:

We write to request information as to what steps the Administration is doing in terms of outreach to minority communities disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Second, we ask that you work with states to gather and provide disaggregated demographic and racial data on COVID-19 deaths to assist public health researchers better understand the disparities. Finally, we request that you ensure that any vaccine or therapeutic drug trials related to COVID-19 includes women, minorities, and LGBTQ+ persons.

COVID-19 has had a particularly devastating impact on racial minorities. According to a *Washington Post* analysis of early data, COVID-19 “appears to be infecting and killing black Americans at a disproportionately high rate.”¹ Specifically, the analysis shows that “that counties that are majority-black have three times the rate of infections and almost six times the rate of deaths as counties where white residents are in the majority.”² In New Jersey, where racial data is available, Hispanics and African Americans account for 25.8 percent and 25.7 percent of COVID-19 cases respectively.³ This despite that Hispanics make up 20.6 percent of the State’s population, and African Americans 15 percent.⁴ In Milwaukee County, “African Americans account for about 70 percent of the dead but just 26 percent of the population.”⁵ In Chicago, African American residents have died at a rate six times that of whites.⁶ The disparities likely persist in other groups as well. As Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot acknowledged, there is likely “‘significant underreporting’ among Hispanics, who account for roughly 14 percent of [Chicago’s] known [COVID]-19 cases and are 29 percent of the city’s overall population. Asians, representing about 7 percent of the population in Chicago, make up about 3.6 percent of known coronavirus cases.”⁷ In Michigan, African Americans account for 13.4 percent of the

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/07/coronavirus-is-infecting-killing-black-americans-an-alarmingly-high-rate-post-analysis-shows/>

² *Id.*

³ https://www.nj.gov/health/cd/documents/topics/NCOV/COVID_Confirmed_Case_Summary.pdf

⁴ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/NJ>

⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/07/coronavirus-is-infecting-killing-black-americans-an-alarmingly-high-rate-post-analysis-shows/>

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/07/chicago-racial-disparity-coronavirus/>

population but make up a disproportionate 33 percent of COVID-19 cases and 40 percent of deaths.⁸

These disparities are exacerbated by higher rates of chronic disease among many minority populations, inequitable access to health care, reduced rates of economic opportunity, lack of educational opportunities, inadequate access to grocery stores, language barriers and the inability to properly social distance due to working in jobs deemed essential.⁹ Milwaukee's Mayor Tom Barrett is seeking to address these disparities in the short term by testing residents in Milwaukee's predominately African American neighborhoods at twice the rates of those in majority-white areas.¹⁰ Mayor Barrett also said he is exploring new ways to conduct outreach to African American communities.¹¹ To that end, we ask for more information on the steps the Administration is taking to conduct outreach to minority communities, including the 15 percent of Americans who don't speak English at home.¹²

The President himself acknowledged these racial disparities during a White House briefing on April 7.¹³ The President said, "[w]hy is it three or four times more so for the black community as opposed to other people? [...] It doesn't make sense, and I don't like it, and we are going to have statistics over the next probably two to three days."¹⁴ Unfortunately, we lack a full picture of the scope of the problem as "[d]etailed data on the race of coronavirus patients has been reported publicly in fewer than a dozen states and several more counties."¹⁵ For this reason, it is imperative that you work with states and localities to provide disaggregated racial and other demographic data on COVID-19 deaths to the CDC.

Finally, any clinical trials for vaccines and therapeutic treatments of COVID-19 must include participants that racially, socioeconomically, and otherwise demographically represent the United States. Alarming research shows that although "African Americans represent 12% of the United States population, they make up only 5% of all clinical trial participants. Only 1% of clinical trial participants were Hispanic, though they comprise 16% of the national population."¹⁶ As a result, "[i]nequitable research can lead to dangerous outcomes for those who are not represented in clinical trials. Drugs including chemotherapeutics, antiretrovirals, antidepressants, and cardiovascular medications have been withdrawn from market due to differences in drug metabolism and toxicity across race and sex."¹⁷ With a disease striking so violently within certain populations, it more important than ever that these populations are represented in any clinical trials.

Thank you for your continued work during this pandemic. We look forward to your response and thank you for your consideration of these important issues.

⁸ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/detroitcitymichigan,US,PST045218>;
https://www.michigan.gov/coronavirus/0,9753,7-406-98163_98173---,00.html

⁹ *Id.*; <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/07/us/coronavirus-black-americans-race/index.html>

¹⁰ https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/covid-19-is-ravaging-black-communities-a-milwaukee-neighborhood-is-figuring-out-how-to-fight-back/2020/04/06/1ae56730-7714-11ea-ab25-4042e0259c6d_story.html

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/05/21/millions-of-u-s-citizens-dont-speak-english-to-each-other-thats-not-a-problem/>

¹³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/07/coronavirus-is-infecting-killing-black-americans-an-alarmingly-high-rate-post-analysis-shows/>

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ <https://www.jhscipolgroup.org/blog-1/2017/9/6/diversity-in-clinical-trials>

¹⁷ *Id.*

Sincerely,

/s/ Robert Menendez
/s/ Doug Jones
/s/ Bernard Sanders
/s/ Sherrod Brown
/s/ Tammy Baldwin
/s/ Edward J. Markey
/s/ Richard Blumenthal
/s/ Richard J. Durbin
/s/ Cory A. Booker
/s/ Benjamin L. Cardin
/s/ Tim Kaine
/s/ Gary Peters
/s/ Jacky Rosen
/s/ Kamala D. Harris
/s/ Mark Warner
/s/ Debbie Stabenow
/s/ Michael F. Bennet
/s/ Robert P. Casey, Jr.
/s/ Catherine Cortez Masto
/s/ Mazie Hirono
/s/ Amy Klobuchar
/s/ Tom Carper
/s/ Jack Reed
/s/ Christopher A. Coons
/s/ Jeffrey A. Merkley
/s/ Chris Van Hollen