

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 29, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pence
Vice President of the United States
The White House
Office of the Vice President
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Vice President Pence:

I write to you regarding a concerning new report of White House interference with decision making at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) surrounding the appropriate handling of migrant children being detained by the Trump Administration. This follows a previous letter I sent to you on October 16th regarding interference in the COVID-19 response. In that letter, I referenced separate reports of your role in pressuring CDC to inappropriately use the agency's emergency powers under Title 42 of the Public Health Service Act to close the northern and southern borders and called on you to immediately cease interfering with public health decision making.¹ However, in the short time since sending that letter, yet another report has surfaced regarding interference that has continued to plague our country's ability to effectively respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. On October 23, 2020, the *Washington Post* reported the Trump White House is attempting to compel CDC officials to sign a declaration stating placing migrant children in hotels is the best way to protect detained migrant children from COVID-19.² This claim lacks scientific merit, and asking CDC scientists to lend support to this otherwise unfounded claim represents another instance of dangerous and misguided interference in the scientific work of our public health agencies for political reasons.

Presently, migrant children are detained in licensed shelters overseen by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Earlier this summer, the Administration started housing children in hotels due to overcrowding in these shelters overseen by HHS and as a supposed countermeasure to COVID-19 outbreaks in the shelters. However, in early September, a federal judge ordered the Trump Administration to stop this practice and remove the detained migrant children from hotels as soon as possible after finding that the Administration could provide no evidence to support its public health justifications for the action.³ In response to this decision, and to seemingly justify and resume this practice, the Trump White House has reportedly pressured CDC to sign a declaration stating there is a public health basis for the claim that hotels are the best way to protect migrant children from COVID-19. In reality, there is no such basis. If there was sound evidence to support these claims, surely the Administration would have

¹https://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/201016%20Letter%20to%20Pence%20Overrule%20CDC%20Decisions%20V5_signed.pdf

²<https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/10/23/immigrant-minors-hotels-trump/>

³https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/judge-orders-us-to-stop-detaining-migrant-children-in-hotels/2020/09/04/fbe23f8e-ef13-11ea-bd08-1b10132b458f_story.html

provided such evidence in court. These hotels are reportedly open to the public and do not provide decreased exposure to the virus that causes COVID-19. Additionally, whereas the shelters overseen by HHS are licensed and run by individuals with specific training, the hotels are run by third-party contractors with minimal training. Finally, the licensed shelters overseen by HHS are expected to provide access to legal services, education, and other programming that is unlikely to be provided in a hotel run by a third party contractor. That is why several CDC officials have reportedly declined to sign the declaration. Commandeering the scientists at the CDC to issue support for this effort is unacceptable.

This is far from the only instance of political interference from the Trump White House that has hampered the country's COVID-19 response. This alarming pattern is putting lives at risk, especially at time when it is more important than ever that we foster public trust in our scientific agencies and their decisions regarding public health guidance, the evaluation and eventual distribution of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines, and more. This requires that we insulate these agencies from political interference, especially from the White House, which has a disastrous record of interference that spans the entire pandemic response. That is why I urge you to immediately stop pressuring CDC scientists to sign this declaration that has no scientific merit and put these children at more risk.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Patty Murray". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Patty Murray
United States Senator