

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 12, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pence
Vice President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Vice President Pence:

We write to urge the Administration to ensure all Americans, including older adults, individuals with disabilities and those with limited English proficiency (LEP), have access to accurate, up-to-date and clear information about the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19). In order to slow the spread of the virus and provide state and local health departments the time to prepare and respond to the outbreak, all people need the best possible and most current information. We strongly urge all departments and agencies to require that announcements (live televised, videotaped and posted to the internet), documents, press releases, guidance and all other forms of communication regarding COVID-19 are created and distributed in an accessible format and manner.

Working to ensure all communities in America have access to COVID-19 information starts at the top. For example, the President and his Cabinet officials can be models of accessibility by having American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters at every news conference about COVID-19. This type of action not only guarantees that members of the deaf and hard of hearing community are able to receive information in real time, but it also highlights the importance of tailoring communication modes to meet the needs of all communities. Similarly, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are over 25.6 million individuals who speak English less than “very well”.¹ It is critical to keep people with LEP well informed, especially in times of a public health crisis.

In order to understand what actions the federal government is taking, or planning to take, to ensure accessibility to information about COVID-19:

1. During public health emergencies, updated information is often available on government websites, which many seniors may not use or be able to access. What efforts have you taken to ensure that seniors regularly receive the most up-to-date information about the outbreak?
2. In what ways are you making information on government websites accessible to all populations? Specifically, how are you working to:

¹ United States Census Bureau, “Selected Social Characteristics in the United States” *American Community Survey* <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=dp02&tid=ACSDP1Y2018.DP02&vintage=2018>.

- a. Ensure all information posted on government websites about COVID-19 is screen readable?
 - b. Include audio descriptions and alt-text of photographs, charts, tables and other graphics?
 - c. Guarantee all information can be accessed using a keyboard instead of a mouse?
 - d. Ensure information is available and regularly updated in languages other than English?
3. The President and agency officials have held news conferences to update the public on the Administration's efforts to combat the outbreak and provide safety recommendations. To what extent are you working to ensure that all future press conferences and public live or videotaped statements include an American Sign Language interpreter and CART (communication access real-time translation) services?
 4. How will you ensure that published materials are understandable by individuals with intellectual disabilities? Do you plan to produce plain language announcements and guidance, made available at the same time as source documents?
 5. Will you continue to fund resources for the distribution of information in languages other than English, specifically in languages spoken in each geographic region around the country?
 6. Have you consulted or do you plan to consult with stakeholders from disability, senior and LEP communities on how best to disseminate COVID-19 information and guidance to these populations? If such discussions have already occurred, how have your communications and outreach efforts changed in response to their recommendations?
 7. As you advise states on their responsibilities in the midst of this outbreak, are you offering them suggested practices to adequately communicate with seniors, individuals with disabilities and LEP individuals? If so, please share those instructions.

Please respond to the following questions no later than April 3, 2020. We look forward to your response detailing how the federal government plans to make information available to these communities and to your immediate action on any further action needed to make this request a reality.

Sincerely,



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



Jack Reed
United States Senator



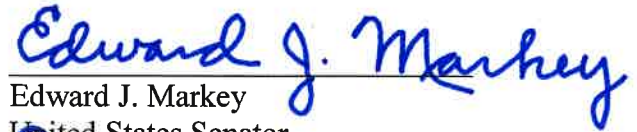
Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



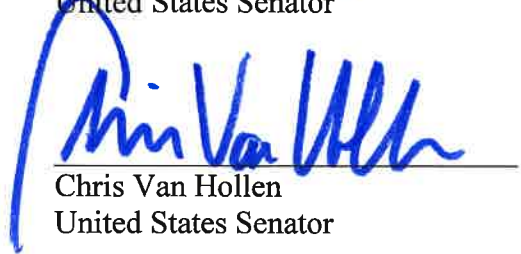
Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



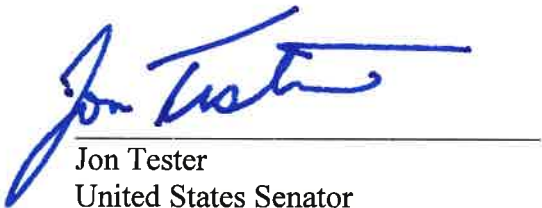
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



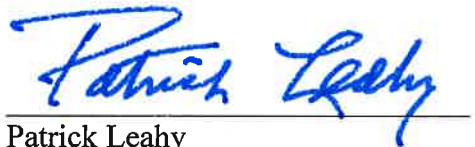
Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



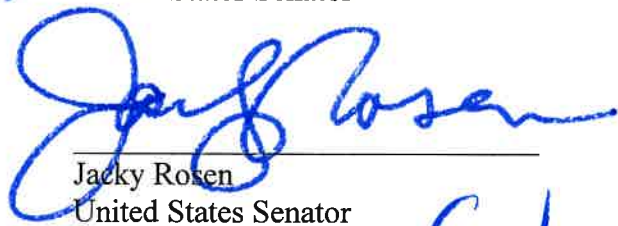
Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Jon Tester
United States Senator



Patrick Leahy
United States Senator



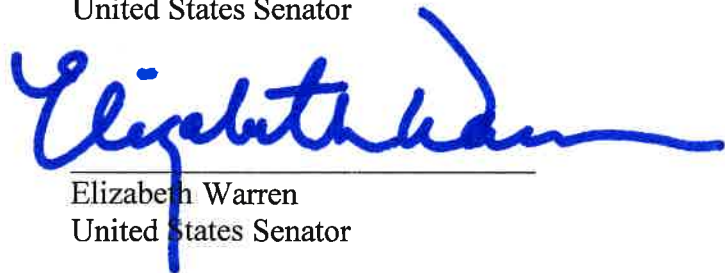
Jacky Rosen
United States Senator



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



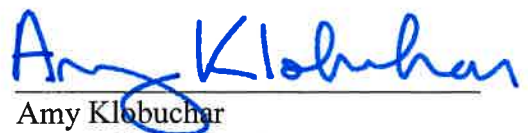
Tina Smith
United States Senator



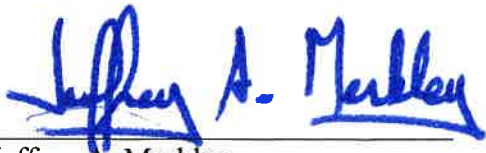
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



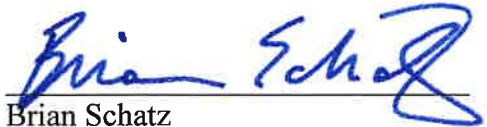
Tim Kaine
United States Senator



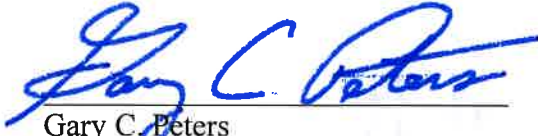
Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



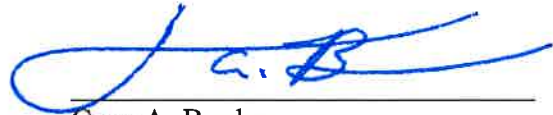
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



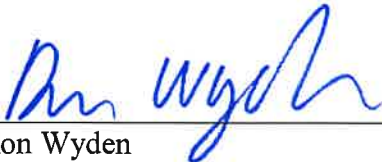
Brian Schatz
United States Senator




Gary C. Peters
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator



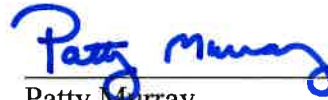
Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator



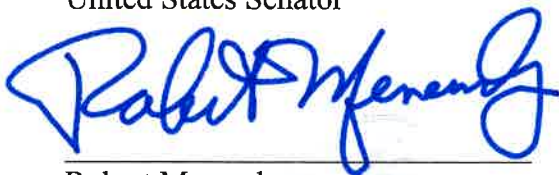
Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator



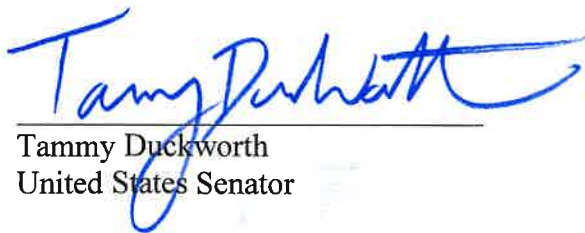
Patty Murray
United States Senator



Robert Menendez
United States Senator



Thomas R. Carper
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Mark R. Warner
United States Senator



Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator

cc:

Dr. Deborah L. Birx
Coronavirus Response Coordinator
White House Coronavirus Task Force