

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4606

March 11, 2020

The Honorable Michael R. Pence
Vice President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Vice President Pence:

I am deeply concerned that despite the seriousness of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, your coronavirus taskforce and members of the Administration have failed to consistently counter the significant amount of misinformation conveyed to the American public. In many instances, we have seen misinformation spread by those seeking to profit from untested and potentially dangerous products misrepresented as effective treatments for the virus.¹ Of even greater concern, false or misleading information has also come directly from prominent members of the Administration, up to and including the President. I believe that, left unaddressed, this misinformation and conflicting messaging will undermine our ability to respond to COVID-19 by reducing public confidence in ongoing public health efforts, creating economic uncertainty and causing the public to respond in counterproductive ways.

As you know, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has sickened more than 118,000 people around the world, and killed more than 4,200 people to date.² While this situation is rapidly evolving in the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has said the potential public health threat posed by COVID-19 is very high.³ It is essential that the Administration communicate timely and accurate information to the American public. This should include a coordinated effort to address potentially harmful misinformation spread through social media and other sources.

On March 4, 2020, during a phone call televised to millions of viewers, President Donald J. Trump indicated that Americans who fear they may have COVID-19 should continue going to work and not seek medical care, and told viewers that the World Health Organization's (WHO) estimates of the virus' deadliness were false.⁴ In addition, on February 26, 2020 the President carelessly downplayed the seriousness of this outbreak by telling the American public that COVID-19 cases in the U.S. were "going very substantially down, not up" and that the existing

¹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/social-media/facebook-groups-coronavirus-misinformation-thrives-despite-broader-crackdown-n1151466;https://www.axios.com/coronavirus-fake-cures-treatments-fraud-2472e354-c137-4198-bbf9-393511fbb653.html>

² <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/685d0ace521648f8a5beeeee1b9125cd>

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/summary.html>

⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/05/media/donald-trump-sean-hannity-coronavirus/index.html>

15 cases in the U.S. “is going to be down to close to zero” in two days.⁵ As you know, cases have increased exponentially since that time.

The President’s injudicious and false statements could gravely undermine ongoing public health efforts to contain the outbreak. His statements directly conflict with the advice and recommendations of your own coordinated federal response and leading public health experts and will likely exacerbate economic uncertainty and discourage individuals from seeking needed care. To date, I am not aware of any steps your Administration has taken to publicly correct this false narrative.

In addition, such remarks stoke and legitimize already widespread online misinformation concerning the virus. There are indications that at least some of the misinformation is derived from, or at least amplified by, malicious foreign actors.⁶ Additional misleading statements from members of the Administration, combined with intentional falsehoods pushed by these malicious actors, will only make matters worse.

Successfully combatting COVID-19 will require that public officials, health care providers and the American public act in a coordinated and responsible manner and, should the need arise, follow recommendations of public health experts to social distance, self-quarantine and take additional safety measures. This will not be possible if the Administration does not take proactive steps to counter false information and consistently relay trusted, accurate and timely information to the American public.

Simply put – this conflicting messaging and misinformation will weaken our ability to respond to COVID-19 and significantly undermine ongoing public health efforts. I strongly encourage you to publicly withdraw and correct President Trump’s statements and other false statements made by members of the Administration. In addition I ask that, moving forward, the coronavirus taskforce proactively monitor and develop a comprehensive strategy to counter widespread misinformation, including campaigns by foreign actors or parties seeking to profit from fraudulent health treatments. Information conveyed to the public must accurately reflect the latest guidance from public health experts and other authorities. Thank you for your attention to this request and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Mark R. Warner
U.S. Senator

⁵ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-conference/>

⁶ <https://medium.com/dfrlab/bioweapons-secret-labs-and-the-cia-pro-kremlin-actors-blame-the-u-s-for-coronavirus-outbreak-ffc2139c28dd>; <https://www.ibtimes.com/coronavirus-update-russia-blames-usa-ncov-2019-outbreak-2916034>