

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

August 27, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
H-232, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
H-204, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Majority Leader
United States Senate
S-230, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Senate Minority Leader
United States Senate
S-211, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader McConnell, Leader McCarthy, and Leader Schumer:

As our country continues the process of reopening, it is clear that we need a pre-hospitalization warning system that identifies early waves of COVID-19 at their inception.

An early warning system using network-connected devices and wastewater surveillance for the early identification of spreading illness is versatile, cost effective, and supported by health care experts. It is essential infrastructure for our country, identifying future illness outbreaks early and allowing for mitigation and early containment.

Early efforts at combating COVID-19 have relied heavily on hospital case counts. However, this doesn't account for the large number of cases who can't or won't show up in hospitals, and by then it's too late to contain the virus, as the disease has already spread in the community. We must find these cases earlier. And while our country's recent increases in COVID-19 testing are promising, testing alone is not a cost-effective solution. Even in the absence of an unforeseen outbreak like COVID-19, contagious illnesses greatly impact our economy. For example, seasonal influenza costs our economy billions annually through earnings losses, employee absenteeism, and hospitalizations. Early surveillance data – such as population-level illness data derived from sources before someone sees a doctor or gets a test – in addition to health care system data that's derived from sources such as doctor's visits, testing and hospitalization rates, provide critical information for decision makers to see the full picture for informed and targeted mitigation and response.

When used in conjunction with the aforementioned health care data sources, early warning surveillance data that allows us to identify outbreaks early will enable our public health system to address hotspots and population level community spread. This will help decision makers send the necessary resources to identified areas of infection with geographical, tactical precision. It will allow us to contain the campfire before it spreads into a wildfire. Not only will this strategy save both lives and livelihoods; it will save billions of dollars, and will help unaffected areas maintain relative normalcy, allowing the American economy to rebuild and thrive.

We ask that you prioritize early warning systems and support the inclusion of language addressing this issue in the Phase 4 COVID response legislation. The integration and implementation of data derived from advanced network-connected technologies, such as smart thermometers, pulse oximeters, and wastewater surveillance, are critical to the work to predict and contain high consequence, emerging, infectious disease threats.

Getting our economy back on track is paramount. We must get Americans back to work and students back to school safely. Hot-spotting of COVID-19 outbreaks using an early warning system will allow data driven decision making and will lessen the extent to which severe interventions are needed to curb the spread of illness. It will also allow us to more accurately target hot spots, allowing less affected surrounding areas to more appropriately enact local policies and result in fewer lives and livelihoods lost to COVID-19. We write in support of prioritization of this issue in the upcoming Phase 4 COVID response.

Sincerely,



Raul Ruiz, M.D.
Member of Congress



Gus M. Bilirakis
Member of Congress