



One Hundred Sixteenth Congress
Committee on Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

September 24, 2020

The Honorable Chad Wolf
Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Mr. Wolf:

On February 29, 2020, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) posted on its website a “Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Summary,” which stated the following:

“While there is still much to learn about the unfolding situations in California, Oregon and Washington, preliminary information raises the level of concern about the immediate threat for COVID-19 for certain communities in the United States. The potential public health threat posed by COVID-19 is very high, to the United States and globally ... More cases of COVID-19 are likely to be identified in the coming days, including more cases in the United States. It’s also likely that person-to-person spread will continue to occur, including in communities in the United States. It’s likely that at some point, widespread transmission of COVID-19 in the United States will occur.”¹

When you last testified before the Committee on March 3, 2020, you were asked by Congresswoman Lauren Underwood:

“Can you please provide a detailed update on exactly how DHS is working with the Centers for Disease [Control] and Prevention and state and local public health departments to respond to the coronavirus?”²

In response to this question, you stated:

“Sure. So, we are working with them every day. So, every single day, we have task force meetings not only at the senior level of the task force, but also individually. We talked about earlier about our chief medical officer talking with him and collaborating not only

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Summary, (Feb. 29, 2020) (online at <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/85497>).

² House Homeland Security Committee, Hearing on “Fiscal 2021 Budget Request for the Homeland Security Department,” 116th Congress (March 3, 2020).

with HHS [Department of Health and Human Services] but with CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention]. We have other individuals collaborating with ASPR [Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response] as well.”³

Despite your own account of frequent U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and CDC contact, you wrote in the written testimony that you submitted to the Committee in March:

“Based on current information, the risk from COVID-19 to the American public remains low and we are taking measures to keep the threat low and prevent the virus from spreading.”⁴

The Committee seeks to understand why inconsistency exists between your statement in March that the “risk” to the American public from the coronavirus “remains low” and the CDC’s warning in February that the “potential public health threat” from the virus was “very high.” Of course, as events proved the very month of your testimony, the actual public health threat was extraordinarily high. Additionally, the Committee seeks to understand what the measures were as referenced in your written testimony that were being undertaken by DHS “to keep the threat low and prevent the virus from spreading”—particularly as these measures obviously failed.

Finally, I note that according to recordings released by CNN, President Trump told Bob Woodward on March 19 that:

“I wanted to—I wanted to always play it down. I still like playing it down, because I don’t want to create a panic.”⁵

The Committee seeks to understand whether the President or anyone at the White House instructed or asked you to play down statements on the coronavirus.

As part of the Committee’s oversight of these issues, the Committee requests that you provide to the Committee by October 9, 2020, the following:

1. Documents sufficient to show the date of the earliest briefing or meeting in which you participated in which any representative of the CDC discussed the coronavirus, as well as documents sufficient to show the dates of each briefing you attended in which the CDC discussed the coronavirus prior to March 3, 2020, including the name and title of each representative of the CDC in attendance at each such meeting and/or briefing;
2. Documents sufficient to show the date of the earliest briefing or meeting in which DHS’ Chief Medical Officer (CMO) or any other DHS senior level officials participated in which

³ *Id.*

⁴ Testimony of the Honorable Chad Wolf, Department of Homeland Security, House Homeland Security Committee, Hearing on “Fiscal 2021 Budget Request for the Homeland Security Department,” 116th Congress (March 3, 2020) (online at <https://homeland.house.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony%20-%20Wolf.pdf>).

⁵ CNN, “‘Play it down’: Trump admits to concealing the true threat of coronavirus in new Woodward book” (Sept. 9, 2020) (online at <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/09/politics/bob-woodward-rage-book-trump-coronavirus/index.html>).

any representative of the CDC discussed the coronavirus as well as documents sufficient to show the dates of each briefing the CMO or any other DHS senior level officials attended in which the CDC discussed the coronavirus prior to March 3, 2020, including the name and title of each representative of the CDC in attendance at each such meeting and/or briefing;

3. Documents sufficient to show the earliest date in which you were briefed or informed by a representative of the CDC that the coronavirus was each of the following (a) deadly; (b) a high public health threat to the United States and to the world; and (c) likely to be transmitted on a widespread basis throughout the United States; and
4. All documents from any time period prior to March 3, 2020, referring or relating to measures undertaken by DHS to keep the threat to the United States from the coronavirus low and prevent the virus from spreading in the country.

Finally, the Committee requests that you answer in writing the following question by October 9, 2020:

1. Did anyone at the White House instruct or request you at any time to downplay the threat of the coronavirus to the United States?

Thank you for your attention to these matters.

Sincerely,



BENNIE G. THOMPSON
Chairman