

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
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WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115

Majority (202) 225-2927
Minority (202) 225-3641

July 8, 2020

The Honorable Russell T. Vought
Acting Director
Office of Management and Budget
725 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20503

Dear Acting Director Vought:

On April 22, 2020, we sent you a letter regarding President Trump’s decision to suspend U.S. funding for the World Health Organization (WHO) asking for a response by May 6.¹ Despite assurances from your staff, we still, more than two months later, have not received a response to our letter. Accordingly, we write to reiterate our expectation that a full and complete response to those requests be provided as soon as possible. We now also seek a response explaining how President Trump’s decision to withdraw from WHO—during a global pandemic—furthers the nation’s public health interests and protects American lives in the ongoing efforts to contain the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19).

To date, the Administration has not provided a coherent public health justification for the President’s reckless decision and has failed to adequately explain the process by which this decision was reached. In fact, in a hearing before our Committee on June 23, Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and Dr. Robert Redfield, Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)—leaders of key U.S. public health agencies with longstanding relationships and ongoing partnerships with WHO—testified that they were not consulted about the President’s decision to withdraw from WHO.² This testimony appears to confirm a disturbing report that found “key U.S. agencies that work with [WHO] on critical public health programs were not consulted or asked for an impact analysis”

¹ Letter from Rep. Frank Pallone, Jr., Chairman, Rep. Anna G. Eshoo, Chairwoman, and Rep. Diana DeGette, Chairwoman, House Committee on Energy and Commerce, to Office of Management and Budget Acting Director Russell T. Vought (Apr. 22, 2020).

² Testimonies of Anthony S. Fauci, M.D. and Robert R. Redfield, M.D. before the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, *Hearing on Oversight of the Trump Administration’s Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 116th Cong. (June 23, 2020).

before the President decided to withdraw.³ In his testimony, Dr. Fauci also informed our Committee that he has concerns about the President's decision to withdraw from WHO but had not spoken with the President in approximately two-and-a-half weeks.⁴ These disclosures are alarming and warrant a robust explanation from the White House.

As you are aware, on April 14, 2020, President Trump announced he was halting U.S. funding of WHO pending a "review" of the organization's purportedly mismanaged response to COVID-19.⁵ Shortly after this announcement, the Committee sent you a letter requesting information on the President's decision to suspend WHO funding, including requests for details on the extent to which the Administration considered the potential public health impact before implementing the funding suspension and the process by which the Administration would conduct its "review" of WHO.⁶ At the time, the President's actions appeared to be a temporary diversionary tactic aimed at deflecting blame away from the Administration's own failures in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷

Given the devastating nature of the ongoing public health crisis—which has now killed over 500,000 people worldwide, including over 130,000 Americans—we hoped the Administration would ultimately heed the advice of numerous U.S. public health experts and resume normal relations with WHO.⁸ Unfortunately, President Trump has doubled down on this ill-conceived policy. In a letter sent to the WHO Director-General on May 18, President Trump threatened to make his temporary funding freeze permanent and "reconsider" U.S. membership in WHO if the organization did not commit to unspecified "substantive improvements" within 30 days.⁹ The President's letter contained multiple false or misleading statements, and omitted any consideration of how the Administration was prospectively assessing U.S. public health interests

³ *Exclusive: The Secret Plan to Unwithdraw From the WHO After Trump's "Bizarre," "Ruinous" Exit*, Vanity Fair (June 8, 2020).

⁴ Testimony of Anthony S. Fauci, M.D. before the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, *Hearing on Oversight of the Trump Administration's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 116th Cong. (June 23, 2020).

⁵ Remarks by President Trump in Press Briefing (Apr. 14, 2020).

⁶ Letter from Rep. Frank Pallone, Jr., Chairman, Rep. Anna G. Eshoo, Chairwoman, and Rep. Diana DeGette, Chairwoman, House Committee on Energy and Commerce, to Office of Management and Budget Acting Director Russell T. Vought (Apr. 22, 2020).

⁷ *See, e.g., Criticized for Pandemic Response, Trump Tries Shifting Blame to the W.H.O.*, New York Times (Apr. 14, 2020).

⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Coronavirus Disease 2019 Cases in the US* (accessed July 8, 2020) (www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html); *Coronavirus Death Toll Surpasses 500,000 Worldwide*, CBS News (June 29, 2020).

⁹ Letter from United States President Donald J. Trump to Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization (May 18, 2020).

in its “review” of WHO.¹⁰ Just 11 days later, on May 29, the President announced he was unilaterally “terminating” the United States’ relationship with WHO due to the organization’s purported failure to make unspecified “reforms.”¹¹ According to recent reports, President Trump officially notified WHO that the United States will withdraw from the organization effective July 6, 2021.¹²

The President’s decision has been met with widespread condemnation by leaders across the public health community. The Presidents of the American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Family Physicians, and American College of Physicians called the move a “major setback to science, public health, and global coordination efforts needed to defeat COVID-19” and cautioned that withdrawing from WHO “puts the health of our country at grave risk.”¹³ Echoing these concerns, the President of the Infectious Diseases Society of America warned that the President’s action leaves the United States “more vulnerable to COVID-19 while diminishing our position as the leader in global health.”¹⁴ The Republican Chairman of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions also announced that he “disagree[d] with the president’s decision,” noting it could interfere with vaccine development and U.S. coordination with other countries.¹⁵ And a series of global health experts and government officials have likewise criticized the President’s move as undermining worldwide efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic and one that will cost lives.¹⁶

We share the serious concerns raised by numerous public health experts and are deeply troubled by President Trump’s disregard for the public health community, including leading public health experts in his own Administration. To be clear, WHO—like other public health organizations navigating the rapidly evolving COVID-19 landscape—may make some mistakes. But now more than ever, we must be certain that consequential decisions like this are based on sound public health guidance, and not the political pursuit of a scapegoat or misdirected frustrations.

¹⁰ *Fact-Checking and Assessing Trump's Letter of Rebuke To WHO*, NPR (May 20, 2020).

¹¹ Remarks by President Trump on Actions Against China (May 29, 2020).

¹² *Trump Sets Date To End WHO Membership Over Its Handling Of Virus*, NPR (July 7, 2020).

¹³ American Medical Association, *Statement on Withdrawal of U.S. from the World Health Organization* (July 7, 2020) (press release).

¹⁴ *Trump Notifies World Health Organization of US Intent to Leave*, Roll Call (July 7, 2020).

¹⁵ Chairman Lamar Alexander, *Statement on World Health Organization* (July 7, 2020) (press release).

¹⁶ Letter to Congress on WHO Withdrawal from Public Health, Law and International Relations Leaders (June 30, 2020); *Trump's Exit from WHO Met with Dismay from Global Health Experts*, Washington Post (May 30, 2020).

We expect that a full and complete response to the requests in our April 22nd letter be provided as soon as possible, and we also request that you provide the following no later than July 22, 2020:

1. Prior to notifying WHO of the United States' intent to withdraw effective July 6, 2021, were key U.S. public health agencies, including the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), National Institutes of Health, CDC, or Department of State, consulted about the potential public health impact of this decision? If so, please describe this consultation process and identify whether each agency consulted by the White House agreed with the President's decision. Please also provide a list of any members of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, HHS officials, or credentialed public health experts who were consulted by the White House about this decision and the contents of their recommendations;
2. A complete description of the process by which the Administration conducted its review of WHO leading up to the President's decision to withdraw, including the federal departments, agencies, or offices that were involved in the review and whether any contract consultants or non-governmental entities were involved and, if so, whom;
3. The full criteria the Administration used to conduct its review of WHO, including the specific "reforms" or "improvements" the Administration identified for WHO, any response from WHO regarding the Administration's proposed "reforms" or "improvements," and the reasons why the President announced the decision to terminate the United States' relationship with WHO before expiration of the 30-day period provided in his May 18, 2020 letter to the WHO Director-General;
4. Did the Administration conduct any assessments regarding the extent to which the United States withdrawing from WHO would impact both the global and U.S. responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the implications for longstanding international relationships and coordination between WHO and U.S. agencies? If so, please provide copies of any such assessments. If not, please explain why not;
5. A complete description of how the President's decision to withdraw from WHO and the timing of this decision are necessary to achieve the Administration's "reopening" plan goals, including a complete description of how this decision will promote the development and expeditious distribution of a COVID-19 vaccine; and
6. A complete description of the Administration's plan to formally withdraw from WHO, including a list of federal departments, agencies, or offices that will be involved in its execution; the respective roles and responsibilities of any such federal departments, agencies, or offices; and whether the Administration intends to maintain representation on the WHO Executive Board prior to effectuating its withdrawal on July 6, 2021.

The Honorable Russell T. Vought

July 8, 2020

Page 5

Thank you for your attention to this timely matter. Given that the Office of Management and Budget is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the President's vision across the Executive Branch,¹⁷ we expect your office is well positioned to coordinate a response to the Committee's requests. For questions regarding these requests, please contact Peter Rechter and Kevin Barstow of the Committee Staff at (202) 225-2927.

Sincerely,



Frank Pallone, Jr.
Chairman



Anna G. Eshoo
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Health



Diana DeGette
Chair
Subcommittee on Oversight
and Investigations

¹⁷ *Office of Management and Budget*, The White House (accessed July 8, 2020) (www.whitehouse.gov/omb/).