

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

October 17, 2019

The Honorable Kevin McAleenan
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
245 Murray Lane, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Acting Secretary McAleenan:

We write regarding the growing number of ransomware attacks targeting communities nationwide, and to urge the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to broaden its existing efforts assisting state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) governments' responses to these attacks. These attacks have taken place in over 40 municipalities this year – including cities and towns in Massachusetts.¹

Ransomware, “malicious software, or malware, designed to deny access to a computer system or data until a ransom is paid,”² is an increasingly difficult, dangerous, and expensive problem for local governments across the country. According to the United States Conference of Mayors, “at least 170 county, city, or state government systems have experienced a ransomware attack since 2013” – 22 of which took place in the first half of this year alone.³ In fact, this is likely an underestimate, because many ransomware attacks remain unreported.⁴ The rise in these attacks is particularly disturbing because, in addition to the financial loss tied to data restoration efforts and to the disruption of operations and critical infrastructure, municipalities are at risk of losing important and sensitive data that are crucial to their function, and because ransomware attacks can disrupt vital emergency and other first responder services.⁵

Police departments, courts, transit systems, hospitals, libraries, and schools and numerous other government departments and offices have been targets of these attacks. Officials in

¹ Telegram & Gazette, “Local communities fight back on cyberattacks,” Elaine Thompson, Updated September 23, 2019, <https://www.telegram.com/news/20190921/local-communities-fight-back-on-cyberattacks>; New York Times, “Ransomware Attacks Are Testing Resolve of Cities Across America,” Manny Fernandez, David E. Sanger, and Marina Trahan Martinez, updated August 23, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/22/us/ransomware-attacks-hacking.html>

² Department of Homeland Security Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, “Ransomware,” accessed on September 25, 2019, <https://www.us-cert.gov/Ransomware>.

³ The United States Conference of Mayors, “87th Annual Meeting: Opposing Payment To Ransomware Attack Perpetrators,” accessed on September 25, 2019, <https://www.usmayors.org/the-conference/resolutions/?category=a0D4N00000FCb3LUAT&meeting=87th%20Annual%20Meeting>.

⁴ Department of Homeland Security, “CISA Insights – Ransomware Outbreak,” August 21, 2019, <https://www.dhs.gov/cisa/blog/2019/08/21/cisa-insights-ransomware-outbreak#>.

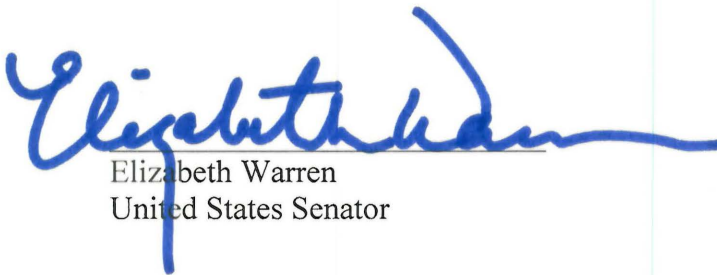
⁵ United States Computer Emergency Readiness Team, “Ransomware: What it is and what to do about it,” accessed on September 25, 2019, https://www.us-cert.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Ransomware_Executive_One-Pager_and_Technical_Document-FINAL.pdf.

Leominster, MA were forced to “pay \$10,000 to a suspected ring of international hackers” in April 2018, after a ransomware attack paralyzed the city’s public school system.⁶ Two months ago, the Athol, MA Police Department “lost a lot of records” after refusing to pay tens of thousands of dollars to hackers that infiltrated its computer network.⁷ And in the same month, New Bedford, MA was victim to a ransomware attack when a virus infected over 150 of the city’s computers and hackers demanded payment equivalent to \$5.3 million through Bitcoin.⁸

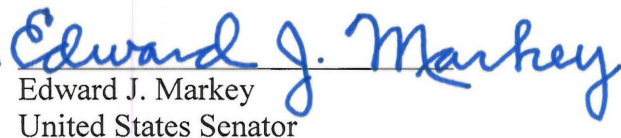
It is reassuring to see the DHS Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) recognizes the urgency of protecting our cities and towns from ransomware attacks and considers the cybersecurity of local and state municipalities “a chief priority.”⁹ We are also glad to see that CISA is launching a program to protect voter registration databases from ransomware attacks.¹⁰ We urge DHS to continue its outreach to SLTT governments, and given the recent spate of attacks across Massachusetts, ask that you provide our staff with a briefing on your ongoing efforts to limit these attacks. Additionally, in order help us better understand how Congress can assist your efforts, we ask that you provide a response detailing existing DHS grants and programs available for SLTT governments to obtain help protecting themselves, as well as what additional authority or funding you need to help you better assist these governments in preventing and fighting future ransomware attacks. We request a response no later than October 31, 2019.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

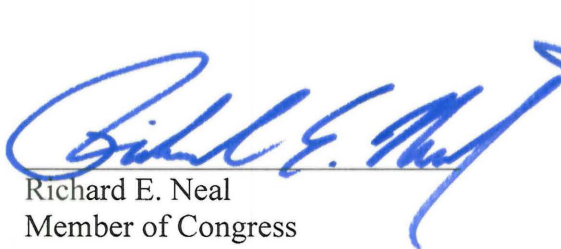
⁶ Boston Globe, “Hackers get \$10,000 in bitcoin after attack on Leominster schools,” Andy Rosen, April 30, 2018, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2018/04/30/hackers-get-bitcoin-after-attack-leominster-schools/4qWHYewEALF3JSfIM5fh6O/story.html>.

⁷ Telegram & Gazette, “Local communities fight back on cyberattacks,” Elaine Thompson, September 21, 2019, <https://www.telegram.com/news/20190921/local-communities-fight-back-on-cyberattacks>.

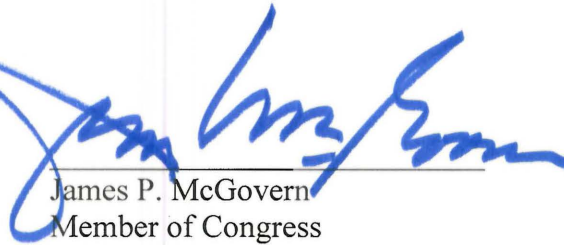
⁸ SouthCoast Today, “Ransomware attacker demanded \$5.3 million from city of New Bedford,” Jennette Barnes, September 5, 2019, <https://www.southcoasttoday.com/news/20190904/update-ransomware-attacker-demanded-53-million-from-city-of-new-bedford>.

⁹ Department of Homeland Security, “CISA Insights – Ransomware Outbreak,” August 21, 2019, <https://www.dhs.gov/cisa/blog/2019/08/21/cisa-insights-ransomware-outbreak#>.

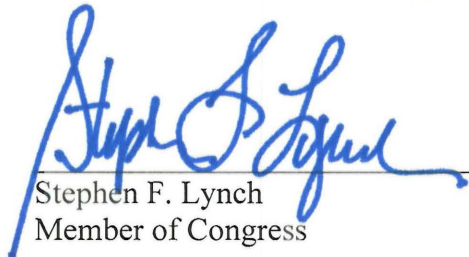
¹⁰ Reuters, “Exclusive: U.S. officials fear ransomware attack against 2020 election,” Christopher Bing, August 26, 2019, <https://in.reuters.com/article/us-usa-cyber-election-exclusive-idINKCN1VG222>.



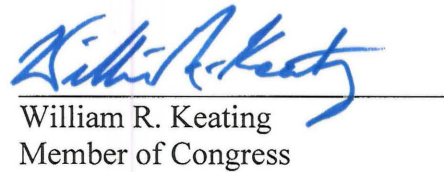
Richard E. Neal
Member of Congress



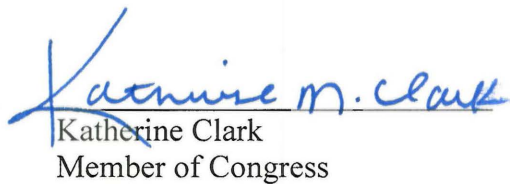
James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



Stephen F. Lynch
Member of Congress



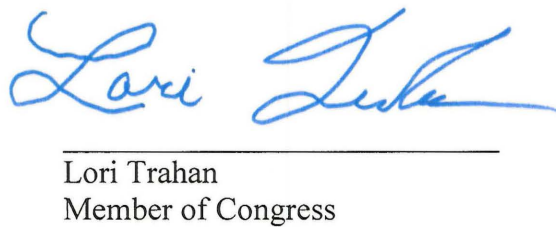
William R. Keating
Member of Congress



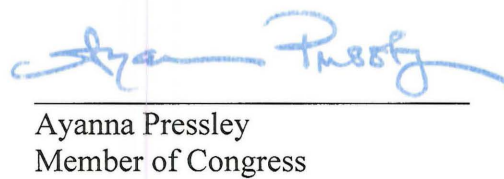
Katherine Clark
Member of Congress



Joseph P. Kennedy, III
Member of Congress



Lori Trahan
Member of Congress



Ayanna Pressley
Member of Congress