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

As the United States continues to weather the disastrous coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, we write to ask that Congress take action to learn from the mistakes of our nation’s preparation and response and lay the groundwork to prevent and mitigate future pandemics. The current Administration’s response has exposed serious flaws in the country’s ability to combat large scale public health challenges. In addition to passing a robust package to address the current crisis, we must take bold and comprehensive steps now to ensure the nation is better prepared for the next pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on communities across the country and devastated the nation’s economy. The United States (U.S.) leads the world with more than eight million confirmed cases and 220,000 dead, out of over one million worldwide.1 Millions are out of work and struggling to make ends meet.2 Despite the passage of The Heroes Act by the House of Representatives in May 2020 and an updated version in October 2020, the Senate has yet to pass a comprehensive COVID-19 relief bill. Congress must immediately act to provide meaningful support to the American people.

Even as Congress works to put an end to the current COVID-19 pandemic, it must also take steps, now, to prevent future pandemics from occurring. Our nation’s bungled response to COVID-19 revealed significant weaknesses in the country’s ability to rapidly respond to emerging global disease threats. As the U.S. confirmed its first cases, the Trump Administration

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failed to establish a robust testing strategy to adequately track and help contain the disease. As the virus continued to spread—disrupting schools, workplaces, places of worship, the economy, and most other aspects of life—it became evident the country was not at all prepared for such challenges to public health. It is clear that pandemics are already rapidly accelerating: animal-to-human outbreak prevalence grew six-fold from 1980 to 2010, and experts predict they will become even more common in the future. It is imperative Congress take bold and comprehensive steps now to prevent and mitigate future pandemics.

**First, Congress must invest in domestic programs, systems, and supply chains that will help improve Americans’ health outcomes, combat the spread of new disease, and ramp up public health capacity during global health emergencies.** The U.S. systemically underfunds public health. In 2017, public health spending accounted for just 2.5 percent of all health spending in the U.S. To boost our public health infrastructure, Congress must invest billions of dollars in state, local, territorial, and tribal health programs and commit to upgrading the data systems necessary to provide public health officials with the real-time, comprehensive information they need to guide public health responses. It must replenish and reform the Strategic National Stockpile so that it is prepared to handle the demand of a true national crisis, provide enhanced funding for state stockpiles, and invest in our domestic drug and device supply chains to ensure resilience and flexibility during global emergencies. It must provide more funding to the Indian Health Service and urban Indian health organizations. It must ensure the President seriously engages the advice of public health professionals by elevating the role of pandemic preparedness experts in the Executive Branch. Finally, it must invest in the support systems—such as safe, affordable housing—that are critical to boosting Americans’ health outcomes, reducing the incidence of chronic diseases and mental health disorders, and ensuring that communities can withstand the economic shocks of future pandemics.

**Second, Congress must support global public health efforts to identify and mitigate the spread of new diseases before they become global pandemics.** Infectious diseases with the potential for global spread can emerge anywhere, with multiple recent pandemics arising on the continents of Asia and Africa. Despite the global nature of pandemics, the Trump Administration has backed away from an international agreement between 172 other countries to

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cooperatively develop vaccines and therapeutics for COVID-19, putting Americans at risk to be last-in-line for vaccines invented elsewhere. COVID-19 will not be stopped anywhere until it is stopped everywhere, and ensuring universal, speedy access to effective vaccines is essential.

Moving forward, Congress must ensure the Administration protects the public by collaborating with the World Health Organization (WHO) and Gavi’s global cooperative COVAX effort and the Medicines Patent Pool, first supported by the Obama Administration. Congress should also boost the U.S. government’s financial commitments to international health organizations, including the WHO; increase and improve efficiency of U.S. global health investments; re-open and support federal public health offices abroad; provide financial support and training to partner countries to help improve emerging disease surveillance; and work with global partners to ensure countries across the world can adequately respond to public health emergencies like pandemics. It is imperative we develop and strengthen both health care systems and robust early warning systems that can identify, respond to, and stop diseases with pandemic potential before they spread. Congress must support reforms to U.S. global health programs to improve their effectiveness, efficiency and equity by supporting countries to strengthen health systems, which are required to defend against pandemics. Congress must also invest in robust data collection and inspections in the livestock and human medical sectors; support research and drug development; and boost antimicrobial stewardship to prevent the unnecessary use of antibiotics and combat antimicrobial resistance. Antibiotic-resistant superbugs are turning preventable diseases into incurable infections.

Third, Congress must create at least 250,000 permanent, high-paying public health jobs to rebuild our depleted public health workforce and ensure the rapid deployment of contact tracers and other support workers during future pandemics. The U.S. is facing an estimated deficit of over 250,000 public health workers, and nearly 80 percent of U.S. counties with high rates of COVID-19 do not have an infectious disease physician. In advance of future pandemics, Congress must rebuild our public health, laboratory, and patient care workforce. These workers should execute key public health initiatives, such as contact tracing, testing

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strategies, vaccine distribution, and disease surveillance, and should be prepared to deploy to support their communities with social support systems in public health emergencies. When the pandemic eases, this public health workforce should continue to work to reduce health disparities, improve health messages among their communities, and address the social determinants of health. Workers can be recruited from and serve their home communities, and they should be trained in alignment with best practices and consultation with state, territorial, tribal (including the Indian Health Service, tribal nations, tribal organizations, and urban Indian organizations), unions, community-based organizing groups, and local public health officials to ensure this workforce suits the needs of each community. Congress must ensure these workers have access to health and safety protections, can unionize, receive universal paid sick leave and family leave, and have access to health insurance and childcare services. Furthermore, Congress must take steps to mitigate the challenges—such as high rates of student loan debt and low job compensation16—that keep qualified individuals from seeking careers in public health.

Fourth, Congress must address the systemic racism and discrimination embedded in our health care system and pass legislation ensuring that health care treatments, pandemic countermeasures, vaccines, and primary disease prevention measures are accessible for all. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the devastating impact of systemic racism and discrimination on the health of the American people. In this country, Black and Latino people are nearly three times more likely to contract COVID-19 than white Americans and nearly five times more likely to be hospitalized.17 Most importantly, people of color are more likely to die from the virus.18 COVID-19 has also had a disproportionate impact on American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders.19 The economic crisis has also caused millions to lose their health insurance,20 and many others with coverage still cannot afford care.21 This inequity is unconscionable, and Congress must take steps to mitigate health disparities and the socioeconomic disparities that undergird them. This includes ensuring that everyone in America has access to high-quality health care, mental health and substance use disorder treatment, and primary disease prevention measures, such as running water. It also means addressing the social determinants of health, like income inequality and unemployment, that affect millions of Americans and disproportionately impact communities of color.22 Congress

should also require companies developing or producing future pandemic countermeasures, therapeutics, and vaccines with federal funding to adhere to reasonable pricing requirements. It must also rebuild the public’s trust in the health care system through efforts to boost vaccine confidence among communities skeptical of public health authorities.

Fifth, Congress must halt the environmental degradation that increases the likelihood of global pandemics. According to the CDC, three out of four new or emerging infectious diseases in people come from animals. Environmental devastation, including “rampant deforestation, uncontrolled expansion of agriculture, intensive farming, mining and infrastructure development, as well as the exploitation of wild species,” is a key contributor to the problem, and has created “a ‘perfect storm’” for the accelerating rise of global pandemics. This environmental degradation has a disproportionate impact on communities of color and Indigenous communities across the globe. In the United States, studies have shown that “racial disparities in exposure to environmental pollutants are greater factors that remain even after controlling for income” and that middle-class Black Americans “are exposed to much higher levels of industrial chemicals, air pollution and poisonous heavy metals, as well as pathogens, than are profoundly poor white people” across urban and rural areas. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated this exposure can increase these communities’ vulnerability to future pandemics. Congress must act to end wildlife trafficking, prohibit the import of commodities linked to illegal deforestation, and provide funding to protect forests around the world. Doing so is one of the biggest steps the United States can take to prevent zoonotic transmission of disease that is one of the root causes of pandemics. These actions can also create a level playing field for companies that follow the rules. Put simply, we must take advantage of win-win opportunities like these to combat climate change, eliminate race and socioeconomic disparities, partner with Indigenous People and local communities in the U.S. and abroad to protect and restore land and water resources, and prevent dangerous practices—including deforestation—contributing to the spread of zoonotic diseases with pandemic potential.

Taking these bold steps will ensure the U.S. is better prepared for any future pandemic and can avert the devastation caused by COVID-19. We look forward to working with you to develop, introduce, and pass meaningful legislation to improve the nation’s response to global pandemics and reduce the likelihood that they will occur.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Ro Khanna
Member of Congress

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Sen. Angus King
Sen. Edward J. Markey
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