

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

April 14, 2020

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

We write to express our strong concerns regarding the racial disparities that exist in COVID-19 cases and deaths in Illinois and across the nation. Public health data collected by the Illinois and Chicago Departments of Public Health indicate that COVID-19 is both infecting and killing black Illinoisans at disproportionately high rates. While black residents make up nearly 15 percent of the state's total population, they account for 43 percent of all COVID-19 deaths. These numbers shed light on grave racial disparities in communities across the United States that have been present for decades. We urge the Department of Health and Human Services to take action to address the impact of COVID-19 on communities of color—particularly black communities—starting with publicly reporting demographic data of cases and deaths on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) website.

In the City of Chicago, the racial statistics of COVID-19 deaths are further concerning. As of April 12, 178 of the city's 277 deaths have been among black residents. Black communities bear the burden of 64 percent of total deaths, despite comprising only about 30 percent of Chicago's population. This number suggests that black Chicagoans are dying at *nearly five times the rate* of their white counterparts. These racial disparities are unacceptable and we must take action to address the rising level of fatalities in our communities of color.

We are glad that the state of Illinois and the City of Chicago have been reporting the demographic characteristics of COVID-19 patients. Unfortunately, many other state and local governments are not—and most importantly, the federal government is not publishing these breakdowns. In other localities that are reporting demographic characteristics for cases and deaths, the trends in racial and ethnic disparities are similar. In Louisiana, about 70 percent of COVID-19 deaths are black residents, despite only a third of the state's population being black. In Milwaukee, a ProPublica investigation published on April 3 found that 81 percent of COVID-19 deaths have been black residents, while just 26 percent of the population identifies as black. While the CDC publishes information stratifying COVID-19 cases by age and gender, it does not include racial background and underlying health conditions. Providing health care providers and the general public with racial and demographic data is essential in assessing the scope of the virus in the black population and other minority communities, and to informing public health departments on how best to respond to the unique challenges facing communities of color.

Current racial disparities in COVID-19 data are reflective of deeply entrenched patterns of historical inequalities in health outcomes. As Dr. Anthony Fauci recently acknowledged, black Americans are far more likely than white Americans to have chronic diseases such as

asthma, heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes—all of which increase the risk of severe complications and death resulting from COVID-19. Black Americans are 60 percent more likely to be diagnosed with diabetes, 40 percent more likely to have high blood pressure, and almost three times as likely to die from asthma-related complications. These racial disparities in the black community stem from historical inequality in our health care system and lead to devastating results. People of color are familiar with a biased health care system that treats black pain less seriously than white pain. It is therefore no surprise that black communities continue to disproportionately suffer from this pandemic.

To add to the growing racial concerns, black Americans are already less likely to have health insurance in this country. A Kaiser Family Foundation report published last month found that, although there have been coverage gains under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) for communities of color, significant racial disparities persist. Black Americans are 1.5 times more likely than whites to be uninsured. At a time when health insurance is more important than ever, we must take action to ensure the health and safety of these communities. This could include opening up a nationwide special enrollment period for ACA plans, as many states have already done. In our state, Governor Pritzker has noted that there are more than 500,000 Illinoisans who could potentially sign up for the ACA tomorrow if the federal government opened up a special enrollment period. Unfortunately, the Administration has refused this idea.

Black Americans also tend to hold more frontline jobs that increase risk of contracting the virus. These include many jobs that have been deemed essential in this pandemic, including food services, public works, and public transportation jobs. Women of color also represent a disproportionately high number of health care and childcare jobs—two vital roles in helping stop the spread of COVID-19. While many Americans are currently teleworking, white workers are about 50 percent more likely to be able to work from home than their black counterparts.

Many people are unaware that the first COVID-19 death in Illinois was a black woman, Patricia Frieson, who was a 61-year old retired nurse. Patricia sadly then passed the virus along to her sister, Wanda Bailey, who also succumbed to COVID-19. We are deeply concerned about the racial disparities that exist in Illinois, and nationwide, with respect to COVID-19 fatalities. We need to ensure that our state and local hospitals and health departments are reporting important demographic data to the CDC regarding COVID-19 cases and deaths, and that the CDC is publishing this information publicly. These vital statistics can then help the federal government, as well as state and local governments and public health departments, to develop plans to protect our most vulnerable populations.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to working with you to help reduce the impact of COVID-19 on our communities of color.

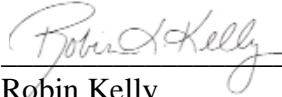
Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



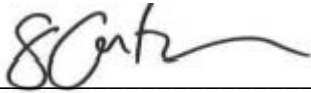
Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



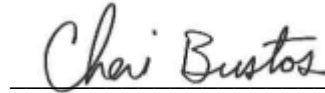
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Member of Congress



Lauren Underwood
Member of Congress



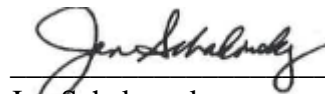
Sean Casten
Member of Congress



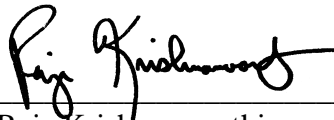
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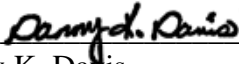
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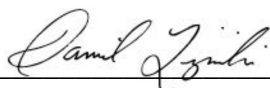
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