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UNITED STATES
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COMMITTEE ON THE BUDGET

September 3, 2020

Alex M. Azar II
Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Azar,

I write with grave concerns about the latest announcement that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is soliciting bids for a \$250 million advertising campaign “to defeat despair and inspire hope” about the COVID-19 pandemic. It appears the advertising campaign is intended to “instill confidence to return to work and restart the economy,” which is in direct contravention of guidance from public health experts and could lead to another wave of COVID-19 cases and deaths.

While I strongly support public health advertising based in science and facts, any taxpayer-funded advertising campaign must be led and coordinated by our nation’s foremost public health experts—the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)—without interference from the White House or political appointees. All public health advertising should be based on CDC’s public health guidance and should not be distorted by messages designed for partisan political gain. The American people must be able to trust that government-funded communications are intended to protect public health and save lives.

However, the details reported by the media make it appear that the winning communications firm will work in tandem with Michael Caputo, the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, instead of experts at CDC.¹ If this solicitation is being led by Mr. Caputo, a Trump campaign alum, it suggests the advertising campaign will not be based on CDC’s public health guidance—instead, it could be a thinly-veiled effort to use taxpayer dollars on a propaganda campaign to support the President’s reelection effort, which would be incredibly dangerous to public health and a gross abuse of taxpayer dollars.

More than 180,000 Americans have already died amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, by far the highest number of deaths of any country. It is time to listen to public health experts instead of partisan political appointees.

¹ <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/31/hhs-contract-coronavirus-despair-hope-406361>

Given the severe implications for the potential misuse of taxpayer dollars, please respond to these questions no later than September 8, 2020.

- Did any officials at the White House request or direct HHS to issue this contract bid?
 - If so, please identify those officials.
 - Please identify all Executive Branch components and officials, including but not limited to components and officials in the White House and HHS, involved in decision-making relating to this contract
 - Please provide copies of all correspondence between HHS and officials at the White House relating to this contract.
- Did any officials with the Trump campaign request or direct HHS to issue this contract bid?
 - If so, please identify those officials involved in decision-making relating to this contract
 - Please provide copies of all correspondence between HHS and Trump campaign officials relating to this contract.
- What is the scope of work for this media campaign?
 - Please provide documentation and any correspondence related to this media campaign.
- Will the media campaign be required to follow CDC's public health guidance?
 - If it is not, please explain and provide documentation regarding this decision.
- What is the timeline for this media campaign?
 - Please provide documentation and any proposed metrics for success of the advertising campaigns.
- Did HHS place out for bid any other contracts regarding an advertising campaign on the pandemic prior to September 1st?
 - Please provide any details and documentation if applicable.

Given the urgent circumstances, I reiterate that a response to these questions is requested no later than Tuesday, September 8, 2020. As always, I stand ready to work with you to protect the health and safety of the American people, who deserve answers to these questions.

Sincerely,



Rosa DeLauro
Chair
House Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and
Human Services, Education, and
Related Agencies