

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 27, 2020

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

The Honorable Robert R. Redfield, M.D.
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Rd
Atlanta, GA 30329

Dear Secretary Azar and Director Redfield:

I write to bring your attention to concerns that first responders in New Hampshire have raised regarding the protocols that laboratories and public health entities use for prioritizing coronavirus diagnostic testing and your agencies' guidelines on this topic.

First responders in New Hampshire and across the country are absolutely critical to our response to the novel coronavirus or "COVID-19." These brave emergency medical technicians, firefighters, police officers and other staff must continue to perform their essential duties in the community. However, if they are not able to be on duty due to delays in determining whether someone who they came into contact with has COVID-19, our ability to respond to this pandemic will be limited. At present, if first responders are not wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) and come into contact with someone who is suspected of having COVID-19, known as a "source patient," the first responders are required to self-quarantine. The first responder is required to continue this self-quarantine until either: (A) the source patient's testing for COVID-19 comes back negative, or (B) 14 days have passed since the contact with the source patient, whichever is sooner.

Under current protocols in New Hampshire, there is no prioritization for processing of laboratory results for source patients with suspected cases of COVID-19 who have come into contact with first responders. As a result, processing of lab testing for these patients can take three to five days at commercial laboratories. If testing and processing of lab results for source patients who have had contact with first responders could be prioritized, more first responders would be able to return to their duties in the field more quickly. While we should follow the lead of public health experts to help ensure that testing is available for those who need it most, it will also be important to ensure the highest possible prioritization of testing and processing of laboratory results for these source patients with exposure to first responders.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) developed recent guidelines¹ for prioritization of COVID-19 testing, which can serve as a model for state public health departments and other state agencies to follow. The guidelines do not clearly or concretely

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Priorities for Testing Patients with Suspected COVID-19 Infection," March 2020. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/priority-testing-patients.pdf>

discuss any prioritization of source patients with suspected COVID-19 infection who have come into contact with first responders. I urge your agencies to investigate whether there are circumstances where it would be clinically appropriate to expedite testing for these source patients who have come into contact with first responders, so that first responders can return to their vital duties sooner if a source patient tests negative for COVID-19. If your agencies revise any guidelines, I urge you to continue to publicly promote the revisions in the guidelines so that state and local agencies are kept aware of the changes.

Thank you for your attention to this issue. Working together we can ensure that our first responders and our public health systems are ready to meet this challenge.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jeanne Shaheen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator