

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 22, 2020

The Honorable Eugene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street N.W.
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

We write to request that the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) conduct a review of requests for proposals, contract bids and other materials relating to the public relations campaign contract solicited by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to “defeat despair and inspire hope” about the coronavirus or COVID-19 pandemic. Press reporting indicates that HHS is funding a massive \$250 million public relations and advertising effort that lines up conspicuously with the timing of the President’s re-election campaign.¹ The public relations campaign will reportedly focus on business operations, efforts to “restart the economy,” and other matters that are, at best, tangential to the mission of HHS. Congress did not authorize or appropriate funding for this public relations campaign, and we are deeply concerned that resources used to finance it are being pulled away from essential pandemic response efforts at the Department.

At a September 16th hearing of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies, Dr. Robert Redfield told the Subcommittee that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) was directed to transfer \$300 million from its emergency COVID-19 funding to support the public relations campaign.² At the hearing, Dr. Redfield emphasized the urgent need for additional funding to support COVID-19 vaccine distribution, making the transfer of CDC funding for this public relations campaign even more alarming.

Press reporting on this public relations campaign indicates that the “performance work statement” for the contract and materials from HHS suggest that the majority of the \$250 million for the campaign should be spent by the end of the calendar year, which raises concerns about potential alignment with President Trump’s re-election campaign. According to Dr. Redfield’s testimony, CDC was not involved in the selection of the award and has not contributed to the development of the messaging for the campaign. It is unclear whether there will be any scientific and public health-focused review of the information included in the messages that are disseminated to the public, either at the agency-level or by an independent, nonpartisan group of experts. We believe it is vital to ensure that all of the information about this pandemic that is conveyed to the public is accurate and based on the best available science and evidence. The Administration must be honest about the risks Americans face during this pandemic, and how they can protect themselves and their families from infection based on scientific data.

¹ Lipman, Daniel, “HHS Bids \$250 Million Contract Meant to ‘Defeat Despair and Inspire Hope’ on Coronavirus,” *Politico*, August 31, 2020. Available at: <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/31/hhs-contract-coronavirus-despair-hope-406361>

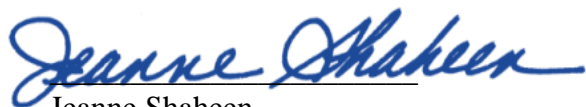
² Senate Committee on Appropriations, “Review of Coronavirus Response Efforts,” September 16, 2020. Webcast available: <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/hearings/review-of-coronavirus-response-efforts>

To ensure that federal resources that were appropriated to support critical pandemic response efforts are not being used to aid a re-election campaign for President Trump or other candidates, and to verify that these funds are used appropriately, we request that GAO examine the following questions:

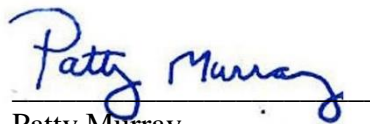
1. Which offices or agencies within HHS developed the request for proposal, performance work statement, and other related documents that were sent to contractors for the communications contract?
2. What role has HHS, Operation Warp Speed, and the White House played in developing strategies or plans regarding mass advertising, public service advertisements, or social media campaigns related to the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. Which discretionary accounts has HHS drawn funds from to pay for the \$250 million public relations campaign? What activities and COVID-19 mitigation efforts have been funded by these accounts?
4. Are there COVID-19 response activities that will not be fully-funded due to the transfers?
5. Do the bid or contract materials related to the public relations campaign include language that requires the advertisements and messages that are produced align with evidence-based public health recommendations established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institutes of Health, or other federal public health authorities?
6. Do the bid or contract materials related to the public relations campaign provide any detail on the extent to which the advertisements and public messages would be reviewed by career scientists and public health experts within the Department's sub-agencies to ensure accuracy?

Please do not hesitate to contact Peter Fise in Senator Shaheen's office at 202-224-2841 with any questions regarding this inquiry.

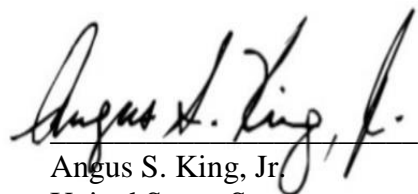
Sincerely,



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on
Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education and Related Agencies



Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator