The Honorable Mike Pence  
Vice President of the United States  
Chair, White House Coronavirus Task Force  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

The Honorable Russell T. Vought  
Acting Director  
Office of Management and Budget  
725 17th Street NW  
Washington, D.C. 20503

Dear Mr. Vice President and Acting Director Vought:

We write today asking you to leverage all available resources and immediately allow the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to cooperate with Congress to mitigate the spread of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) across VA’s employees and veteran patients. Congress has a constitutional obligation to engage in oversight of the Executive Branch, and as such, our Committee must engage in oversight in a manner that is appropriate for supporting and protecting the interests of veterans, their families, and taxpayers. We have a mutual goal—to ensure VA staff have the resources needed to keep themselves and veteran patients safe and minimize the spread of the virus across the system, ensure VA can continue providing high-quality and timely care for our nations veterans, and prepare VA to expand the provision of health care beyond the veteran population.

We greatly appreciate the weekly telephone and daily electronic briefings from Secretary Wilkie and Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Executive in Charge Dr. Stone, which detail the Department’s ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In recent weeks, however, these high-level updates have not been sufficient, and we have requested that VA provide copies of relevant memoranda, policy guidance, emails, and other written instructions that VHA has sent to its medical facilities pertaining to operational changes related to the COVID-19 emergency. We have found that the information reported to the Committee through VA’s daily and weekly briefings—especially with regard to availability of personal protective equipment (PPE)—stands
in stark contrast to what we have heard from VA employees and read in the media regarding PPE shortages at VA medical facilities.¹

VA officials have indicated they have cleared the documents for release to the Committee, but that they require the Office of Management and Budget’s (OMB’s) review — a clearance process that has never been part of VA’s past practice for responding to the Committee’s routine requests for documentation and other information. These additional bureaucratic delays have created a logjam in which the documentation we have repeatedly requested has not been provided. The lack of specificity in VA’s ongoing briefings for the Committee not only poses risks of potential harm to veterans, but also leads us to a simple conclusion — your administration has hamstrung VA’s ability to ensure Congress is fully informed of the full extent to which it is prepared to care for veterans and fulfill VA’s fourth mission of augmenting the civilian health care system.

Specifically, we are concerned that while VA has consistently reported to the Committee since March 19, 2020, that it has enough PPE supply on hand to last at least 2 weeks, we are hearing from a growing number of our constituents employed by VA medical facilities that drastic actions have been taken — including issuing only one facemask or N95 respirator per week to staff caring for vulnerable veterans in VA’s community living centers (nursing homes) and spinal cord injury units, and among staff responsible for screening patients, visitors, and employees at facility entrances. According to media articles published within the last week, this is occurring even at facilities not yet facing a large influx of inpatient COVID-19 cases, according to the most recent data VHA has shared with the Committee (e.g., Los Angeles, CA; Kansas City, MO; Hampton, VA; Augusta, GA; Portland, OR; Tampa, FL; Houston, TX; Albany, NY; and Washington, D.C.). Since March 23, 2020, the Committee has repeatedly requested VA documentation that would help better explain how VA is managing its PPE supply and how it is estimating the amount of time it expects current stock to last. These requests have been made dozens of times by the Chairman on calls with Secretary Wilkie and Dr. Stone, and by Committee staff in numerous calls with VA officials. To date, the Committee has received none of the requested PPE policy documentation.

If VA does not provide our Committee with timely information, we cannot adequately exercise our oversight responsibilities, nor can we work with VA to minimize the harm to our veterans caused by this pandemic. We don’t need to waste any more of Secretary Wilkie’s and Dr. Stone’s valuable time with further requests for these documents when it is clear that the White House and OMB are holding up their release.

We appreciate your attention to this request. Please provide the information we have requested above no later than Monday, April 20, 2020. Should you have any questions, please contact Ray Kelley, Staff Director, at (202) 225-9756 or ray.kelley@mail.house.gov.

Sincerely,

Mark Takano
Chairman

Conor Lamb
Vice Chair

Julia Brownley
Chair
Subcommittee on Health

Chris Pappas
Chair
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

Mike Levin
Chair
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

Lauren Underwood
Member of Congress

Gilbert R. Cisneros, Jr.
Member of Congress

Kathleen Rice
Member of Congress