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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION,
LABOR, AND PENSIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6300

February 27, 2018

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

Dear Secretary Azar:

On February 15, 2018, the day after the Parkland high school shooting, you testified before the House Energy and Commerce Committee that you support research on gun violence prevention. You further stated that you consider it “a priority” for your Department.¹ The time has long since passed for the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), to treat gun violence with the urgency that public health epidemics require, and I was pleased to hear you agree. In 1996, Congress passed legislation, known as the Dickey Amendment, supported by the National Rifle Association (NRA) prohibiting the CDC from using federal funds “to promote or advocate gun control.”² However, I have long believed and agree with your understanding that “the rider does not in any way impede [HHS’s] abilities to conduct [its] research mission.”³ While the Dickey Amendment may prohibit advocacy, it does not prohibit objective, evidence-based research. Nonetheless, public health research into gun violence remains woefully inadequate.

Since 2012, the United States has averaged more than 35,000 gun deaths per year, with nearly 39,000 gun deaths occurring in 2016.⁴ Since the Columbine High School Massacre in 1999, over 150,000 students in at least 170 schools have experienced a shooting on campus.⁵ Health professionals across the country consider gun violence in America a “public health crisis requiring a comprehensive public health response and solution.”⁶ Common sense gun safety measures are needed now, and we must also increase research into this epidemic to deepen our understanding and inform new solutions and practices. From fighting cancer to decreasing road traffic fatalities, public health research has played a critical role in saving lives. It is immoral and unacceptable to treat gun violence any differently.

¹ <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/02/15/alex-azar-cdc-gun-violence-research-414977>

² <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/02/18/whats-missing-from-the-gun-debate-217022>

³ <http://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/374075-trump-health-chief-supports-cdc-research-on-gun-violence>

⁴ <http://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2595514>; <https://everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-by-the-numbers/>

⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2018/02/20/how-mass-school-shootings-affect-the-education-of-students-who-survive/?utm_term=.f281c0aa0a24

⁶ <https://www.ama-assn.org/ama-calls-gun-violence-public-health-crisis>

As I strongly share your priority, and as Ranking Member on the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, I look forward to working with you and the Department on the critical areas of research and prevention. To begin this process, I request a staff briefing in order to understand how HHS, CDC, and NIH plan to prioritize research into gun violence prevention efforts. Please also provide the following documents and responses by no later than March 6, 2018:

1. What is the Department's current approach to assessing and addressing gun violence? Please provide a description of any efforts the Department has undertaken in the past year with regard to gun violence prevention.
2. What future Department actions are you considering with regard to gun violence prevention? Specifically:
 - a. What areas of CDC research are you planning to pursue and/or bolster?
 - b. What public health education campaigns are you planning to pursue?
 - c. Do you plan to expand the National Violent Death Reporting System?
 - d. Do you plan to adapt any public health surveys to capture increased data about gun-related injuries and deaths and optimize prevention efforts?
 - e. Do you plan to reinstate NIH's work on gun violence, which reportedly has been "under consideration" since September 2017?
 - f. Do you have a plan to investigate gaps in research and survey capabilities related to gun violence in your Department, and to share that information with Congress?
 - g. How will you protect research projects on gun violence and career staff who pursue them from political pressures?
3. Will you encourage the Surgeon General to be an advocate for treating gun violence as a public health epidemic?
4. The Institute of Medicine released a report in 2013 that outlined a research agenda of five key areas necessary to better understand gun violence prevention: "characteristics of firearm violence," "risk and protective factors associated with firearm-related violence," "firearm violence prevention and other interventions," "the impact of gun safety technology," and "video games and other media."⁷ Will you pursue research in each of these areas? If not, why not? What areas do you consider a priority?
5. Do you support pursuing research regarding:
 - a. The relationship between gun access and youth suicide;
 - b. The relationship between gun violence and domestic violence;
 - c. The role of safe gun storage in preventing gun-related injuries and deaths and how best to promote safe storage;
 - d. The opportunities for education around risks of firearms;
 - e. The role of existing policies in contributing to or preventing gun-related injuries and deaths; and
 - f. Disparities in firearm-related fatalities in subpopulations, particularly considering vulnerable populations?
6. Do you support increased federal investments in gun violence research and prevention? Will you advocate for more funding from Congress?

⁷ <https://www.nap.edu/read/18319/chapter/1#ix>

Thank you for your attention to this critical matter. If you have any questions, or would like to further discuss compliance with this request, please contact Andi Fristedt or Elizabeth Letter with my Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee staff at (202) 224-0767.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Patty Murray". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Patty" and last name "Murray" clearly distinguishable.

Patty Murray
United States Senator
Ranking Member, Senate Health, Education,
Labor, and Pensions Committee