

# United States Senate

April 25, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer  
Minority Leader  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader McConnell and Leader Schumer:

Science is moving at an unprecedented pace to better understand COVID-19 and develop methods for containing it. Federal doctors and scientists have unparalleled expertise about public health and safety, as well as the care of the sick—and they must be empowered to follow the evidence where it leads and publicly communicate what they find. Simply put, successful pandemic response is dependent upon the ability of government experts to tell us what they know, when they know it. Accordingly, we request that S.775, the *Scientific Integrity Act*, should be incorporated into the next COVID package.

We should expect any administration to put its best experts at the front lines of the pandemic response, and we should all be able to agree that:

- science should be the basis of all public health decisions;
- science informing public policy decisions is based on objectively verifiable facts; and
- science communicated to the public should be free from politics or ideology.

Unfortunately, scientific information is being filtered through political appointees who are not scientists, and those who want to investigate scientific claims made by the White House face retribution and retaliation.

There are plenty of recent examples:

- CDC experts have not been allowed to disseminate important information to the public.<sup>1</sup>
- Dr. Rick Bright was abruptly dismissed from his position as the director of the Department of Health and Human Services' Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority, allegedly because he pushed for additional scientific testing for hydroxychloroquine.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shear, M.D.; Haberman, M. Pence will control all coronavirus messaging from health officials. *The Washington Post*. February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/27/us/politics/us-coronavirus-pence.html>

<sup>2</sup> Baker, M., et al. Vaccine chief says he was removed after questioning drug Trump promoted. *New York Times*. April 23, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/us/coronavirus-live-coverage.html#link-3fb57dec>

- Senior CDC scientist Nancy Messonnier was removed from coronavirus response several weeks ago after warning that Americans should begin preparing for “significant disruptions” to their lives.<sup>3</sup>
- The CDC has not held a press conference since March 9.

We based the *Scientific Integrity Act* on the principles that this Administration has abandoned, and we request the inclusion of this bill in the next COVID package. In the alternative, we urge you to include strong scientific integrity provisions that protect the science that underpins our nation’s response to the COVID crisis. At a minimum, the package should require that government scientists are able to:

1. Publicly share data and analysis with the public;
2. Ensure that statements made by government officials are accurate;
3. Conduct research without political interference in their methodology; and
4. Be protected from retribution for following the evidence where it leads.

Recent surveys of federal scientists demonstrate that many experience undue political pressure to make their research more politically convenient. In fact, a paper published on April 23, 2020, showed that hundreds of federal experts self-censor because of fear of retribution from superiors who will not like their results.<sup>4</sup> This is not acceptable under normal circumstances, but under a pandemic, it is catastrophic.

The American people desperately need access to reliable information and scientific advice about how to protect themselves and their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we request your immediate action to protect the federal experts who provide it.

Sincerely,



BRIAN SCHATZ  
United States Senator



RICHARD BLUMENTHAL  
United States Senator

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<sup>3</sup> Weindling, J. Coronavirus health officials pay the price for contradicting Trump. April 23, 2020. *International Business Times*. <https://www.ibtimes.com/coronavirus-health-officials-pay-price-contradicting-trump-2963783>

<sup>4</sup> Goldman, G.T.; Carter, J.M.; Wang, Y.; Larson, J.M. 2020. Perceived losses of scientific integrity under the Trump administration: a survey of federal scientists. *Plos One* 15(4): e0231929. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0231929>