

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

March 20, 2020

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

As COVID-19 continues to rapidly spread in Maine and throughout the United States, health care professionals and public health officials are experiencing shortages of essential medical equipment. While we understand the inevitable strain on the supply chain, we are deeply concerned about the significant challenges that the State of Maine has identified in obtaining requested equipment and supplies from the Strategic National Stockpile (SNS). Personal protective equipment (PPE) is desperately needed to keep health care workers who are on the frontlines safe and able to provide care. In light of the President's comments yesterday to governors, we encourage the Administration, led by your Department's example, to recognize its critical role in coordinating our nation's supply of medical equipment, including PPE, testing supplies, and ventilators, during this pandemic.

Over the past several days, the number of COVID-19 cases in Maine has rapidly increased and demand is expected to soon outstrip the available supply. The challenges Maine is experiencing in obtaining medical equipment from the SNS is particularly concerning considering Maine is the oldest state in the nation by median age and older adults are at the highest risk of fatalities from COVID-19. Based on our conversation with Governor Janet Mills, we understand a lack of communication with the Assistant Secretary of Preparedness and Response's office is limiting the State's ability to allocate and distribute supplies because they do not know what they can expect to receive. While we recognize the need to tap into all authorities necessary to reduce shortages and ensure that demands are met, communication and expectation management is essential for planning purposes in the interim.

Keeping providers across settings of care—including hospitals, nursing homes, assisted living facilities, home health agencies, and our first responders—healthy and able to work is critical to our ability to manage the increased number of patients they will be tasked with treating in the coming days and weeks. PPE is what allows doctors, nurses, and other front line responders to provide care to those who have, or are suspected to have, COVID-19. Hospitals in Maine are already coping with limited supplies by rationing the use of standard surgical masks to one per day. In situations that require N95 respirators, systems are having to strategically decide which cases are the riskiest and warrant the use of limited available resources.

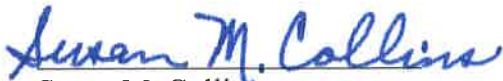
The severe shortage of PPE and other medical equipment endangers health workers, reduces testing capacity, dampens service delivery, and weakens our overall coronavirus

response across the United States. Now more than ever, we need confidence that resources from the SNS are available to states and that the Administration is working collaboratively with health care providers, businesses, and state leadership to identify available supplies – both in the federal stockpile and across the private sector.

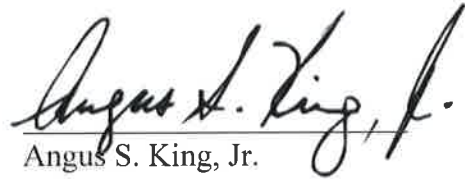
We urgently request that you ensure distribution plans are in place to ensure a reliable delivery to states. We also urge HHS to work hand-in-hand with the private sector to coordinate increased production and distribution of essential medical supplies, including, but not limited to, PPE and ventilators.

Thank you for your work in protecting Americans during this time, and we look forward to working with you to meet this urgent need to protect our health care workers.

Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins
U.S. Senator



Angus S. King, Jr.
U.S. Senator



Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress



Jared Golden
Member of Congress