



BILL LEE
GOVERNOR
STATE OF TENNESSEE

August 12, 2020

The Honorable James Clyburn
Chairman, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Clyburn:

Thank you for your letter dated July 29, 2020. I appreciate your interest in Tennessee's response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and your commitment to carrying out the responsibilities and duties of the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis.

As you are aware, the Coronavirus pandemic has created significant public health and economic challenges for individuals and governments at the local, state, and national levels. It is not only the scope of the pandemic that presents challenges but our evolving clinical understanding of the virus. Responding to these challenges has required an "all hands-on deck" approach, bringing multi-disciplinary experts and private and public leaders together.

To give a sense of the breadth of our response, I have attached a detailed timeline of my administration's actions since the onset of the pandemic. Our response has focused on reducing bureaucratic barriers, strengthening private sector partnerships, and finding every opportunity to protect the lives and livelihoods of Tennesseans.

This approach has been evident from the earliest stages of my Administration's response to the crisis. Rather than centralizing our response to the health crisis within a single agency or the Governor's office, we established the Unified Command Group (UCG), which streamlined coordination between our Department of Health, Department of Military, and Emergency Management Agency.¹ Whether ensuring that any Tennessean who needed a test could get one² or securing sufficient surge capacity and PPE availability, the UCG facilitated our comprehensive response to the pandemic.

Recognizing the disproportionate impact that the pandemic was having on communities of color, the Tennessee Department of Health, Office of Minority Health, launched a Statewide Health Disparities Task Force to help the state quickly generate responsive solutions and

¹ <https://www.tn.gov/governor/news/2020/3/23/gov--bill-lee-establishes-covid-19-unified-command.html>

² <https://www.tn.gov/governor/news/2020/4/15/gov--lee-announces-aggressive-statewide-covid-19-testing-effort.html>

policies to reduce these disparities by examining existing data, monitoring trends, and hearing from those living in, working in, and serving our communities.³ The Task Force was also critical in increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of disseminating information to minority communities, as well as working with faith communities and health care providers to provide free testing in their communities.

To ensure that we were adequately addressing the economic challenges of the crisis, I established the Economic Recovery Group (ERG).⁴ The ERG, composed of 30 leaders from the public and private sectors, has crafted guidance to assist Tennessee businesses in safely reopening. The industry representatives participating in the ERG collectively represent over 140,000 Tennessee businesses that employ over 2.5 million Tennesseans.

Sharing in the mission of the Subcommittee and consistent with my Administration's commitment to serving as good stewards of taxpayer resources, I also created the Financial Stimulus Accountability Group to ensure proper fiscal management of stimulus funds received by the state through the Coronavirus Relief Fund created by the CARES Act.⁵ The federal role in supporting state responses has been crucial, and it is incumbent upon governors to ensure that federal resources are used wisely, effectively, and transparently.

I bring these actions to your attention because I believe it is important for you and the Subcommittee to understand that Tennessee's response to the pandemic has been data driven and relied on broad collaboration between public and private leaders, subject matter experts, and stakeholders. I believe that this balanced approach has served Tennessee well.

Your letter appears to insinuate that I have chosen to ignore the public health guidelines developed by the White House Coronavirus Task Force and have chosen instead to follow some alternative set of recommendations from the Administration. Fortunately, reality doesn't often fit into the preferred narratives of Washington, and this case is no exception.

Tennesseans are thankful for the commitment of President Trump, Vice President Pence, Ambassador Birx, and other members of the White House Coronavirus Task Force to tackling this crisis. It has been my experience that the whole-of-government approach pursued by the Administration has complemented the work of state and local leaders without tying their hands.

During Ambassador Birx's visit to Tennessee on July 27, she praised Tennessee as having a "sound strategy" on mask requirements and working with local governments to implement those measures when appropriate. On August 1, Ambassador Birx again praised Tennessee's response during a White House roundtable when she noted our innovative approach to school reopening and efforts to supply 80,000 classrooms and teachers with personal protective equipment and sanitization kits.

³ <https://www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/dmhde/covid-19-health-disparity-task-force.html>

⁴ <https://www.tn.gov/governor/news/2020/4/16/gov--lee-establishes-economic-recovery-group-to-reboot-tennessee-economy.html>

⁵ <https://www.tn.gov/governor/news/2020/4/16/gov--lee-announces-stimulus-financial-accountability-group.html>

As for our current plans to “implement additional public health measures to control the spread of the coronavirus,” we intend to continue using a collaborative, data driven approach to addressing the dynamic circumstances of the pandemic. Should Congress agree upon any future actions to support the state-level, public health response, we will certainly factor those actions into our overall strategy. In the meantime, my administration remains focused on safely reopening our schools, managing the economic recovery, and keeping Tennesseans healthy.

Finally, in response to your request for “documents or communications regarding formal or informal guidance and public health recommendations provided by the White House Task Force to stop the spread of the coronavirus in Tennessee,” please find included with this letter the weekly state reports beginning on June 29th.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill Lee". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bill Lee
Governor

Cc: The Honorable Steve Scalise, Ranking Member