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May 5, 2020

The Honorable Michael R. Pence
Vice President of the United States
The White House
Office of the Vice President
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Vice President Pence,

I write to ask again the questions regarding emergency relief oversight that you promised to answer during our conversation on April 15. My request is that you commit to informing Congress any time that the executive branch denies information requested by the Special Inspector General for Pandemic Recovery (SIGPR) or the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee (PRAC) and that you commit to supporting for-cause removal protections for inspectors general.

As you know, the SIGPR is charged with detecting fraud and abuse in the distribution of the over \$2 trillion in pandemic relief funds provided by the Coronavirus Aid, Recovery, and Economic Security Act (CARES). CARES also created the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee, whose role is to more broadly ensure transparency and conduct oversight of the government's response to the pandemic. Given the importance of the recovery programs and the vast sums of money at stake, Congress also included a provision ensuring that we would be alerted to efforts to obstruct oversight by requiring that any request for information or assistance that is unreasonably withheld or delayed be promptly reported to Congress.

These oversight functions are critical to ensuring that the emergency measures we are taking are serving their purpose: alleviating the worst public health crisis since the Spanish Flu and the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. When the independence or effectiveness of the SIGPR, PRAC, and other pre-existing government accountability measures are compromised, we risk more than just undermining government integrity. We risk our very ability to weather these crises.

The Trump administration's record thus far does not inspire confidence. From the very beginning, when signing CARES into law, the president asserted that inspectors general have no right to inform Congress when their investigations are stymied by the executive branch. At a

time when Congress is authorizing the Trump administration to spend trillions of taxpayer dollars, including hundreds of billions of dollars at the discretion of Administration officials, Congress must have the information it needs to fulfill its oversight responsibilities.

President Trump also fired Acting Defense Department Inspector General Glenn Fine soon after he had been selected to serve as chairman of the PRAC, a role he had been selected to fulfill by his fellow inspectors general. Mr. Fine has served honorably in a number of oversight roles in both Democratic and Republican administrations. His abrupt removal only bolsters the message that the President sent with his signing statement: in the midst of one of the greatest challenges our nation has faced, this administration is not taking seriously its responsibility to guide the country through this storm.

Sadly, this firing represents only a particularly egregious example of the President's modus operandi when it comes to inspectors general. Throughout his administration, the President has refused to fill inspector general positions with Senate-approved nominees, and as a result 11 of the nation's 37 Senate-confirmable inspector general positions are currently filled with temporary placeholders, including four that have remained vacant throughout the entire Trump administration. This approach leaves inspectors general vulnerable to presidential retaliation and therefore not fully independent. And as Mr. Fine knows all too well, the President is perfectly comfortable exploiting that vulnerability.

This pattern of behavior is dangerous during the best of times. But the stakes for our country right now are simply too high for this state of affairs to continue. Our lives are on the line. Without strong, independent oversight of the vital emergency funds that Congress has provided, we may not know about waste, fraud, and abuse in these programs until it is far too late. I therefore request answers to the following questions by May 15, 2020:

1. Will you commit to ensuring that Congress will be informed if the executive branch denies information requested by either the Special Inspector General for Pandemic Recovery or the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee?
2. Will you support for-cause removal protections for inspectors general to protect their independence?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Richard Blumenthal". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Richard" being the most prominent.

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

