



November 13, 2020

The Honorable Raja Krishnamoorthi
Chairman
Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy
Committee on Oversight and Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Krishnamoorthi:

Thank you for your letter to Secretary Alex M. Azar II, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), regarding the Department's on-going work to help Americans make informed decisions about the prevention and treatment of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and influenza. I am responding on behalf of Secretary Azar.

Local newspapers, broadcasters and other media outlets play integral roles in informing the public on the latest news and information during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognizing the importance of providing the public with information that encourages sound public health practices, HHS initiated a significant public health education campaign to develop and purchase public-service announcements to keep Americans informed as the pandemic evolves and our country safely reopens.

To build on the public education efforts already underway at HHS, the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs (ASPA) initiated public health education work using available contracts. These contracts purchased radio time nationwide from July 22 to October 25, with an emphasis on the 10 states with the highest rates of COVID-19 infection. The messages shared were from Surgeon General Jerome Adams and a Spanish adaptation encouraging Americans to wash their hands, wear a mask, and watch their distance. In addition, from August 3 to August 31, Out-of-Home Advertising was used in 18 markets with high rates of recovery from COVID-19 featuring Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Dr. Stephen Hahn, Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and Dr. Adams to encourage Americans to donate plasma.

While getting these public health messages into the market, ASPA began developing two Statements of Work for two additional public education contracts. The first was to support an "Immediate Surge" of public health information (up to six months) and the second was for a "Short Term" public education effort (up to two years). Because of the ongoing pandemic, both emphasized the urgency of the work. The request for proposals, including the Statement of Work (SOW), are included with this letter.

The “Immediate Surge” contract was awarded by the FDA after a limited competition. A Technical Evaluation Panel of career federal officials reviewed the proposals submitted. Based on the Technical Evaluation Panel’s recommendation, a contract was awarded to Atlas Research on August 26, 2020, for \$15.1 million.

The “Short Term” contract was competed and awarded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) through the NIH Public Information and Communications Services II Indefinite Delivery, Indefinite Quantity contract vehicle (<https://pics.olao.od.nih.gov/index.html>). This contract mechanism is available to all offices and operating divisions of HHS. Just like any other award made through NIH PICs, a Technical Evaluation Panel of career federal officials made the selection of the organization to receive the award. Based on the Technical Evaluation Panel’s recommendation, a contract was awarded to the Fors Marsh Group on August 31, 2020, for \$251.2 million. The Fors Marsh Group proposal offered a research-based, science-driven communications approach that appeals to the strongest motivators of people’s behaviors and the capacity for immediate action.

We strongly agree that there is no room for political bias in the messages and materials designed by HHS to help Americans make informed decisions about the prevention and treatment of COVID-19 and influenza. Each SOW clearly states the work will be conducted “under HHS leadership and the guidance of scientific expertise.” The plan from the very beginning was to use only materials reviewed by a department-wide team of experts including scientists from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This would ensure the latest scientific information is used to provide important public health information to the American people – including regarding therapeutics and vaccines.

To provide the scientific proficiency and coordination required, Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Michael Caputo asked each HHS Agency/Office Director on September 9, 2020, “to provide the name and contact information for the individual you designate as the lead on this effort. This individual will be responsible for informing the direction and providing the appropriate review of materials and messages by your Agency/Office.” Soon after these individuals were identified by leadership from across the Department, HHS announced on Wednesday, September 16, that Mr. Caputo was taking a medical leave of absence.

Based on media reports as well as questions from and concerns expressed by members of Congress, Secretary Azar testified on October 2, 2020, that he had “ordered a strategic review of this public health education campaign that will be led by top public health and communications experts to determine whether the campaign serves important public health purposes.”

The review has been completed. The review team was provided a briefing on the original campaign strategy to use entertainment industry influence to reach targeted audiences with public health messaging. A new approach for the campaign was proposed and discussed. The new approach would create a dynamic relationship with public health infrastructure, build on established messaging, and develop a comprehensive, consistent, coordinated, and science-based public education campaign with rigorous evaluation and regular impact reporting to inform decision making. The review team agreed there is an urgent and compelling need for culturally

competent and audience relevant public education about COVID-19 prevention, treatments available and ultimately vaccine acceptance and offered their assistance with the effort.

Based on that feedback provided, APSA plans to move forward with the science-based approach for public education put forward by the Fors Marsh Group. The work with members of the entertainment industry conducted by Atlas Research will not continue and that contract will be canceled.

In this unprecedented time, it is critical that HHS leverage all resources and expertise at its disposal to ensure that the American people have substantive, factual information about COVID-19 and influenza. This new public health education effort will be a critical component of saving lives by informing the public of the latest science and public health practices. We look forward to sharing this work with Congress and continuing to provide guidance that motivates the public to make informed decisions about the prevention and treatment of COVID-19 and influenza.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sarah Arbes', written in a cursive style.

Sarah Arbes
Assistant Secretary for Legislation