December 20, 2017

The Honorable Eric D. Hargan
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20201

Dr. Brenda Fitzgerald
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, Georgia 30329

Dear Acting Secretary Hargan and Director Fitzgerald:

We write to inquire about recent reports that employees of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are prohibited from using certain words in budget documents. Although a Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) spokesman has said the alleged ban is, “[a] complete mischaracterization of discussions regarding the budget formulation process” we are gravely concerned about any effort to suppress the CDC’s Guidance on Scientific Integrity, which “[p]laces primary emphasis on scientific evidence for developing policies, guidelines, and recommendations.”1,2 Prohibiting the use of particular terminology appears to directly contradict that policy.

Despite science being at the core of the CDC’s work, the purported order to eliminate specific words politicizes research in a variety of areas and sets a precedent for further censorship. Further, striking “diversity,” “entitlement,” “evidence-based,” “fetus,” “transgender,” “science-based”, and “vulnerable” from 2019 fiscal year budget documents indicates to the scientific community and to the American public as a whole that support for public health research will be contingent upon passing an ideological test.

Following news of the supposed ban, Director Fitzgerald shared, “You may be understandably concerned about recent media reports alleging that CDC is banned from using certain words in budget documents. I want to assure you that CDC remains committed to our public health mission as a science- and evidence-based institution.”3 It’s unclear how CDC plans to reconcile the elimination of the terms “science-based” and “evidence-based” from its self-characterization as a science- and evidence-based institution.

Based on key research and outcomes data, the United States has advanced a national dialogue on ways to improve the health and well-being of diverse and vulnerable populations, including the transgender community and women, and has demonstrated the value of entitlement programs in providing access to quality and affordable care. Any explicit limitation of expression in these areas would be a step backwards from decades of progress.

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3 https://twitter.com/CDCDirector/status/94245936217245696
Please provide the following information by January 3, 2018:

1. Has the CDC or its employees received any form of oral or written guidance or direction from HHS, the White House, or elsewhere in the administration discouraging use of certain words and phrases, including the words “vulnerable,” “entitlement,” “diversity,” “transgender,” “fetus,” “evidence-based” and “science-based”?

2. An article in the Washington Post suggested that Alison Kelly, a career CDC employee in the Office of Financial Services, led a meeting with other CDC personnel where the aforementioned list of words was discussed. Please explain where the request to discuss the aforementioned words with CDC personnel originated from, including by identifying the employee(s) within the Administration or White House who communicated about this issue with Alison Kelly.

3. Please provide copies of any and all physical documents distributed to CDC personnel at the December 14, 2017 meeting referenced in the Washington Post article and any emails sent to staff regarding this meeting.

4. Please identify any alternative words and phrases to “vulnerable,” “entitlement,” “diversity,” “transgender,” “fetus,” “evidence-based” and “science-based” that were suggested to CDC personnel during the December 14, 2017 meeting.

5. Does the guidance or direction on these words provided to CDC extend beyond conversations, processes and/or documents related to the President’s Fiscal Year 2019 budget proposal? If not, are there plans to broaden the scope of the guidance to include other aspects of the CDC’s work?

6. Does the guidance or direction on these words exclusively apply to CDC? Or does it extend to other parts of the HHS? Are there plans to extend this guidance to other parts of HHS in the future? Does the Administration plan to build upon the guidance or direction by discouraging use of additional terms at CDC or other parts of HHS in the future?

We look forward to your prompt response to our request. The American people deserve to know the source and reason for a substantial policy shift in the type information an agency can communicate. The country must understand the purpose and extent of a perceived effort to censor science.

Sincerely,

James R. Langevin
Member of Congress

Diana DeGette
Member of Congress

Suzanne Bonamici  
Member of Congress

Judy Chu  
Member of Congress

Sean Patrick Maloney  
Member of Congress

Nanette Diaz Barragán  
Member of Congress

Donald S. Beyer Jr.  
Member of Congress

Earl Blumenauer  
Member of Congress

Salud O. Carbajal  
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Kathy Cast  
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Matt Cartwright
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Katherine Clark
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Emanuel Cleaver, Jr.
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Jim Cooper
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John K. Delaney
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Suzan K. DelBene
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Mark DeSaulnier
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Mike Doyle
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Ruben Gallego
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Jimmy Gomez
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Jimmy Gomez
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Colleen Hanabusa
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James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

James P. McGovern
Member of Congress
Gregory W. Meeks  
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Grace Meng  
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Gwen Moore  
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Seth Moulton  
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Scott H. Peters  
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Chellie Pingree  
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Denny Heck  
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Jan Schakowsky  
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Terri Sewell  
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Paul D. Tonko  
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Pramila Jayapal  
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Jamie Raskin  
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Lucille Roybal-Allard  
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Tim Ryan  
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Adam Schiff  
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Dina Titus  
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Debbie Wasserman Schultz  
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Alma S. Adams, Ph.D.  
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Charlie Crist
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Joyce Beatty
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G. K. Butterfield
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David N. Cicilline
Member of Congress