December 3, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Minority Leader McCarthy, Majority Leader McConnell, and Minority Leader Schumer:

Our members are on the front lines fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and working to protect the public’s health. Unfortunately, we are doing so without access to modern, interoperable public health data systems. As the pandemic surges, we urge you to move quickly to pass additional COVID-19 relief funding for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that specifically includes at least $400 million in the for the Data Modernization Initiative (DMI).

These additional resources, coupled with annual appropriations for this program, provide the essential foundational investment needed to upgrade our public health data infrastructure. To properly route this critical investment, we also ask Congress to include authorizing language in the next COVID-19 supplemental in support of data modernization at the CDC and state, local, tribal, and territorial health departments. Language to authorize activities to improve the public health data systems at the CDC was included in H.R. 6800, the Heroes Act, and similar language was included in S. 1895, the Lower Health Care Costs Act, when it was introduced in the Senate last year.

The nation faces an unprecedented challenge to address the global COVID-19 pandemic and a responsibility to create an infrastructure that is capable of responding to future public health emergencies. Now, more than ever, it is critical for CDC to have a strong national public health surveillance system that detects and facilitates immediate response to and containment of emerging health threats. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed deadly gaps in our nation’s public health data infrastructure. The United States currently relies on error-prone, sluggish and burdensome manual and paper-based data exchange methods such as faxing and phone calls to share critical public health data. Simply put, the virus is moving faster than the data. We are watching as our leaders struggle to make critical decisions without accurate data.

We are grateful to Congress for providing a total of $550 million for CDC’s DMI to date. With that funding, Congress has acknowledged that CDC data systems modernization is an indispensable component of public health and pandemic response.

COVID-19 has made it clear that our antiquated public health data systems are not up to the task. We need an integrated, high-speed, networked health system—from laboratories to health care facilities to public health authorities—with fast and reliable data in order to protect Americans from health threats. Modernization is not just network upgrades; it is a commitment to building a world-class data workforce and data systems that are ready for the next public health emergency. Significant investments must be
made to build real-time, automated, electronic, enterprise public health data systems. As Congress negotiates a package to provide critical COVID-19 relief, please include $400 million in funding for the DMI—American lives depend on it. If you have questions or need further information, please contact Meghan Riley at mriley@dc-crd.com.

Sincerely,

Association of Public Health Laboratories
Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists
Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society
National Association for Public Health Statistics and Information Systems

CC:  Rosa DeLauro, Chair, House Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies
Tom Cole, Ranking, House Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies
Roy Blunt, Chairman, Senate Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies
Patty Murray, Ranking, Senate Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies
Lamar Alexander, Chairman, Senate Health Education Labor and Pensions
Frank Pallone, Chairman, House Energy and Commerce
Greg Walden, Ranking, House Energy and Commerce