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United States Senate

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April 29, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Majority Leader
United States Senate
S-230, United States Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell,

I am ready to come back to the Capitol on Monday to vote and conduct oversight of COVID-19 response but am very concerned that, without necessary safeguards in place, you are endangering the lives and health of our constituents who work in the Capitol complex and undermining the efforts of the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in our region. The safety of the Capital Region and our ability to flatten the curve is directly connected to public health experts' recommendations on social distancing and other precautions.

The Washington, D.C. region is a COVID-19 hotspot, with more than 38,000 cases. Over 1,700 residents have lost their lives. In response, Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia are operating under stay-at-home orders to enforce social distancing, keep residents and workers safe, and flatten the curve to ensure capacity for hospitals and healthcare providers to serve the very ill.

COVID-19 has also had direct impacts on the Congress, with staff and members of the Capitol Police testing positive. Last week, the Architect of the Capitol reported that 11 workers on the Cannon House Office Building renovation have contracted the disease. In response to the pandemic, and in accordance with guidance from the White House Task Force, the Office of the Attending Physician, and our local public health officials, the vast majority of Congressional offices have shifted to telework, the Sergeant at Arms has reduced on-site services, and the Capitol Police have limited access to Capitol complex. After discussions with the Office of the Attending Physician, House leadership decided to postpone reconvening.

While I appreciate that the Sergeant at Arms has distributed masks to Senate offices, more is necessary to protect employees and prevent the operations of Congress from stressing the health systems of the region. Congress should, in accordance with the President's "Opening Up America Again" guidelines, "encourage telework, wherever possible and feasible." Members should maximize telework, and we should endeavor to minimize the number of support staff

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necessary to report in-person to the Capitol. Will the Senate follow protocols, as the White House has, for temperature checks or rapid testing of staff and press in the Capitol complex? What impact would the use of tests for our return have on the overall capacity in the region? Staggered voting times on the Floor of the Senate might help protect us, but it does nothing for the staff at the Sergeant at Arms, Capitol Police, and Architect of the Capitol who support us and still puts the staff on the Senate Floor at risk.

My constituents in Maryland and neighbors in the District of Columbia and Virginia are making real sacrifices to stay at home and shutter their businesses to protect our community. Many Senate staff use the Metro system to commute, and it has reduced service hours to protect transit workers. The District, which was shortchanged in the Coronavirus Relief Fund in the CARES Act, is doing all it can to manage this pandemic. While the Senate has critical work to do on behalf of the American people, we must be attentive to our role in controlling the spread of COVID-19 and have clear plans in place to ensure the safety of the staff and Capitol Police who support our work and care for the Capitol. As Mayor Bowser, Governor Hogan, and Governor Northam noted in a letter to the Trump Administration last week, the plans for reopening must consider the safety of federal employees given that, "Failure to do so could lead to a rise in cases and delay our ability to re-open the region."

Again, I am ready to get back to the Capitol, but you have an obligation to ensure the safety of all the staff that work there. I look forward to your plans and guidance to limit the number of staff required to come to the Capitol, minimize support services, and manage the business of the Senate, including voting and committee hearings and markups with appropriate social distance.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Van Hollen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

CHRIS VAN HOLLEN
U.S. Senator