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April 9, 2020

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II  
Secretary  
Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Ave SW  
Washington, DC 20201

The Honorable Anthony Fauci, M.D.  
Director, National Institute of Allergy and  
Infectious Disease  
9000 Rockville Pike  
Bethesda, MD 20892

Dear Secretary Azar and Director Fauci:

Thank you for your tireless work on behalf of all Americans and their health, prior to the current devastating Coronavirus outbreak and especially now as we work to overcome this tragedy.

As you know, my home state of New Jersey has been ravaged by COVID-19—as of April 9 there have been 51,027 confirmed positive cases and 1,700 have tragically lost their lives. Thousands more have lost their lives across the entire Tri-State area which also includes New York and Connecticut. I find this outbreak especially concerning when I consider the countless individuals who live in this region who also suffer from Lyme Disease, which also considers the Tri-State Area as a “hotspot.”

In its inaugural report to Congress in December 2018, the federal Tick-Borne Disease Working Group states there are approximately 300,000 estimated new cases of Lyme in the U.S. each year, and the Working Group notes the number may even be higher: in 2016, the number of new cases was estimated to be between 291,430 to 437,150. They also emphasize that “[i]ncreased Federal funding, prioritization, and leadership are needed to reverse the alarming trends associated with tick-borne diseases.”

While I am appreciative of the collective work you’ve put into this report as well as the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Disease’s October 2019 Strategic Plan for Tickborne Disease Research, I remain deeply concerned about what impact COVID-19 and the Coronavirus outbreak will have on the countless Americans suffering from Lyme Disease and other related coinfections. Does the National Institutes of Health believe Lyme Disease, and other tickborne diseases, are considered underlying conditions which put individuals at higher risk for COVID-19?

Again, thank you for your commitment to public health and thank you in advance for your full consideration of my questions and concerns relayed in this letter. I look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,

CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH  
Member of Congress