

March 12, 2020

Dear [Members]:

As you work to respond to the coronavirus threat on Capitol Hill, we urge you to consider the following:

Prioritize the health and safety of the public, staff, press, and lawmakers: We recognize that there are contradictory pressures to project calm while also modeling appropriate responses, such as the “social distancing” recommended by the Centers for Disease Control. In this vein, we encourage Congress to adopt a “putting on your own mask before assisting others” approach, to take rational steps to limit exposure on the Capitol Campus and within district offices. By temporarily postponing school tours, industry fly-ins, and in-person advocacy meetings, Congress will wisely decrease the risk of contagion to the public and staff.

Take steps to ensure the continued operation of the legislative branch, with modified emergency procedures: While we understand the need for Congress to limit exposure and chances for community spread of the coronavirus on Capitol Hill, we strongly urge Congress to remain capable of conducting business. The first branch of government must continue to legislate, appropriate, and conduct oversight even as the coronavirus makes in-person convening inadvisable; therefore we recommend allowing for the use of commercial technologies to conduct proceedings remotely during the emergency.

Adopt a “digital first” approach and use modern technology to maintain continuity of operations and transparency during emergency response: As both chambers admirably begin to implement steps toward telework for select staff, we encourage Congress to immediately begin working on ways that oversight and legislative work could be conducted online through existing commercial software and teleconference tools. While some functions that remain paper-based may need to continue to be conducted in person by minimal staff, the House and Senate should explore and adopt temporary rule changes that would allow lawmakers’ debate and votes in committee and on the Floor to occur remotely, while still being viewable to members, staff, the press, and public. These changes should be adopted with a “digital first” approach, ensuring that “if it can be done remotely, it should be done remotely” during the emergency response.

Continue to conduct business openly, allow access to the public and media, and provide trusted sources of factual information for constituents: As Congress considers increasingly virtual activity during the emergency period, it should maintain the ability for the public and the media to view proceedings. In addition, even as Capitol access is limited for visitors, members of the Capitol Hill press corps should continue to enjoy unfettered access.

Time-limit emergency provisions: To avoid unintended consequences of emergency-based changes in practice and procedure, they should be enacted as temporary changes, limited in time (we suggest one month) that expire if not renewed. This will allow Congress flexibility during a critical time, but also allows deliberation and debate on changes that could fundamentally alter how Congress conducts its business.

We appreciate the considerable efforts underway to respond to this unprecedented situation and stand ready to assist in any way. If you have any questions about our recommendations, please contact Marci Harris, POPVOX CEO, at marci@popvox.com, or Daniel Schuman, Demand Progress policy director, at daniel@demandprogress.org.

Sincerely,

Kel McClanahan
Executive Director
National Security Counselors

President
International Association of Certified
ISAOs (IACI)

Soren Dayton
Policy Advocate
Direct Democracy

David M.J. Lazer, Professor of Political
Science and Computer Science
Northeastern University

Kevin M. Esterling
Professor of Public Policy and Political
Science
University of California, Riverside

Patrice McDermott
Director
Government Information Watch

Bob Gourley
Co-Founder and CTO
OODA, LLC
Former CTO, Defense Intelligence
Agency

Michael A. Neblo
Professor of Political Science
Ohio State University

Marci Harris
Cofounder and CEO
POPVOX

Daniel Schuman
Policy Director
Demand Progress Education Fund

Lorelei Kelly
Fellow and Director of Congressional
Modernization
Beek Center for Social Impact +
Innovation
Georgetown University
Deborah Kobza, CGEIT, JIEM

Joshua Sewell
Senior Policy Analyst
Taxpayers for Common Sense

Josh Tauberer
President
Civic Impulse, LLC