

JONI K. ERNST
IOWA

VICE CHAIRMAN,
SENATE REPUBLICAN CONFERENCE

WASHINGTON, DC OFFICE
730 HART SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510
PHONE: 202-224-3254
FAX: 202-224-9369

WWW.ERNST.SENATE.GOV

United States Senate

August 18, 2020

COMMITTEES
ARMED SERVICES
AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION
AND FORESTRY
ENVIRONMENT
AND PUBLIC WORKS
JUDICIARY
SMALL BUSINESS
AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Azar,

Thank you for your continued support for efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19, care for those who are infected, and develop safe and effective treatments and vaccines. Your department and its component agencies are our nation's front line of defense in our war against this pandemic and I appreciate all that you and your team are doing to protect public health and end this pandemic.

As you know, there are widespread shortages of pandemic essentials, whether that be personal protective equipment, diagnostic tests, or even hand and surface sanitizers. Federal assistance, whether through the distribution of supplies or dollars, continues to be crucial to obtaining these necessities and making them widely available.

I am proud that under the leadership of Governor Kim Reynolds, [Iowa is a pacesetter](#) when it comes to putting federal assistance to use. Our state has already applied [more than 60 percent of \\$4.06 billion](#) provided by the federal government to COVID recovery and response efforts. Other states and localities have been slower utilizing these resources.

Spending in haste with no strategic planning, of course, can result in waste and bad deals for taxpayers. We see this at the end of every fiscal year when agencies go on the annual "use-it-or-lose-it" spending spree to beat the clock to use tax dollars before the authority to do so expires.

In total, federal agencies spent \$91 billion on 642,567 transactions last September, according to the nonpartisan group Open the Books. That is an average of \$3 billion on 21,418 transactions each day! These last minute purchases included \$457.8 million of furniture, \$1.1 million of games and toys, and nearly \$100,000 of pastries, including \$43,000 for doughnuts, \$36,000 for cake mix, and even \$10,000 for pecan pie.

As it does every year, Open the Books will be releasing another report highlighting how every department spent taxpayer dollars in the final month of this fiscal year for the public to scrutinize.

HHS spent a total of \$5.7 billion on contract in September 2019, the second highest among all federal departments. This included more than \$30 million on "advanced all-hazards stockpile ventilator" and nearly \$8 million on "collaborative influenza vaccine innovation centers." These types of purchases certainly advance the

DES MOINES OFFICE
733 FEDERAL BUILDING
210 WALNUT STREET
DES MOINES, IA 50309
PHONE: 515-284-4574
FAX: 515-284-4937

CEDAR RAPIDS OFFICE
111 SEVENTH AVENUE SE
SUITE 480
CEDAR RAPIDS, IA 52401
PHONE: 319-365-4504
FAX: 319-365-4683

DAVENPORT OFFICE
201 WEST SECOND STREET
SUITE 806
DAVENPORT, IA 52801
PHONE: 563-322-0677
FAX: 563-322-0854

SIOUX CITY OFFICE
194 FEDERAL BUILDING
320 SIXTH STREET
SIOUX CITY, IA 51101
PHONE: 712-252-1550
FAX: 712-252-1638

COUNCIL BLUFFS OFFICE
221 FEDERAL BUILDING
8 SOUTH SIXTH STREET
COUNCIL BLUFFS, IA 51501
PHONE: 712-352-1167
FAX: 712-352-0087

department's mission far more than the \$11 million expended for office and household furniture or \$37,000 paid for reserved parking spaces.

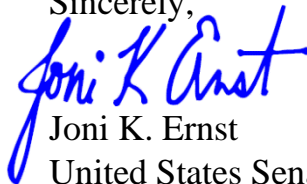
In the weeks ahead, therefore, I would urge the department to give special attention to prioritizing pandemic essentials above all else.

Now, more than ever, is not a time to be wasting money splurging, especially when targeting funds to urgent immediate needs could literally save lives.

Wise purchasing and distribution in a transparent manner will set a much needed example of leadership for those states and localities that have not shown the urgency or ability to make such large acquisitions. Replenishing the Strategic National Stockpile would also ensure our nation is better prepared for another potential wave of COVID or some other unforeseen public health emergency in the future.

Thank you again for your continued commitment to protecting the health of the public, assisting those who are caring for the sick, and prioritizing efforts to bring this pandemic to an end.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Joni K. Ernst". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Joni" and last name "Ernst" clearly legible.

Joni K. Ernst

United States Senator