

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

December 3, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Secretary Pompeo:

I write to express significant concern about the Department's decision to hold multiple holiday parties this month, despite a raging pandemic across the nation. Yesterday, the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said that December and the upcoming winter months could be the "most difficult time in the public health history of this nation."¹ Yet, according to reports, the Department is planning multiple large in-person parties over the coming weeks, both at the Department and at the Blair House, a venue near the White House, with mostly smaller-size rooms.²

The CDC advises that "the safest way to celebrate holidays is to celebrate at home with the people you live with."³ In person gatherings where attendees come from outside the local area, even if spaced at least 6 feet apart are deemed "higher risk."⁴ In-person gatherings involving a larger group of people where such distance is not feasible are deemed "highest risk." According to the CDC, the lowest risk is virtual-only activities and events. In addition, the CDC advises that extra precautions be offered for any employees who may be at higher risk for severe illness.

Based on reports, the Department has already invited close to 900 people. I am concerned that these parties pose a significant health risk, not only to attendees, but to the employees and workers who must staff these events, as well as to State Department employees who may feel pressured to attend. Moreover, holding these parties goes against the Department's own guidance against holding in-person events that are not "mission critical."

¹ Nathaniel Weixel, "CDC director: Winter could be 'most difficult time in the public health history of this nation,'" *The Hill*, Dec. 2, 2020.

² John Hudson, "Pompeo invites hundreds to indoor holiday parties after subordinates are warned against hosting 'non-mission critical events,'" *The Washington Post*, Dec. 2, 2020.

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Holidays," <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/holidays.html> (updated Dec. 2, 2020).

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Events & Gatherings," <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/considerations-for-events-gatherings.html> (updated Nov. 17, 2020).

It is one thing for individuals to engage in behavior that flies in the face of CDC and public health guidelines. But it is another to put employees and workers at risk, some of whom include contractors, such as catering and wait staff, who do not receive the full benefits of federal employment and may not have health insurance.

I hope as we approach this difficult and unusual holiday season that you will put the health and well-being of Department employees and workers first, and cancel any in-person events which are clearly not “mission critical,” nor worth risking further spread of COVID-19.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robert Menendez." The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and a long, sweeping underline.

Robert Menendez
Ranking Member