

ROGER F. WICKER

MISSISSIPPI

ARMED SERVICES

COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION

ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS

RULES AND ADMINISTRATION

COMMISSION ON SECURITY

AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

SUITE 555

DIRKSEN SENATE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

(202) 224-6253

www.wicker.senate.gov

May 21, 2020

The Honorable Michael R. Pence
Vice President of the United States
Chair, White House Coronavirus Task Force
Washington, DC 20502

The Honorable Kelvin Droegemeier
Director, White House Office of Science and Technology Policy
Washington, DC 20502

Dear Vice President Pence and Director Droegemeier,

Thank you for your tireless work to ensure a successful federal response to the COVID-19 public health emergency. Congress and the Administration have shown an unwavering commitment to meeting this challenge. Together we have enacted bold measures to bring relief to businesses, workers, and health-care providers during this time of need.

This crisis calls for an “all of America” approach that brings the best contributions of government, business, and local communities to bear. In light of this ongoing need and the extended nature of the COVID-19 threat, I request that you consider hosting prize competitions to help identify and solve currently unforeseen problems that will affect our nation’s health-care providers and patients in the coming months and beyond. Such competitions can be implemented using existing authority and would harness the power of American ingenuity to meet the challenge of this pandemic.

As you may know, the America COMPETES Act (Public Law 111-358) provides federal agencies the authority to conduct prize competitions “to stimulate innovation that has the potential to advance the mission of the respective agency.” Since the enactment of COMPETES in 2011, prizes have proved to be an effective, outside-the-box tool to solve many of our nation’s most puzzling challenges. Using federal resources to conduct prize competitions would provide several core benefits:

- Prizes provide an excellent return on investment and are a true pay-for-success model. Unlike traditional funding mechanisms, a prize competition ensures the government only pays when a solution has been found.
- Prizes lower the barrier to entry in competitive industries, encouraging diverse and underutilized talent to engage in finding solutions.
- Prizes promote additional, outside investments to fund problem-solvers. Outside investments during prize competitions are often larger than the final prize itself.
- The solutions provided through prize competitions are often different from what the government would have identified. This differs from traditional funding programs, in

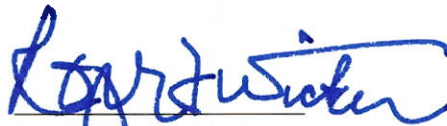
which the government specifies not only the desired outcome but also how it should be achieved, resulting in a loss of innovation and fewer possible solutions.

I first began to champion federal prize competitions in 2015 when I introduced the Ensuring Useful Research Expenditures is Key for Alzheimer's (EUREKA) Act. EUREKA built upon COMPETES authority by directing the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to conduct a prize competition in Alzheimer's research. The legislation was signed into law as part of the 21st Century Cures Act in 2016, and in October 2019, NIH announced three winners that would share \$400,000 in prizes. Those winners are now working to develop innovative technologies to improve Alzheimer's patients' quality of life and continuity of care. EUREKA is one example of how prize competitions can utilize the private sector to achieve needed solutions. As America continues to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, we should not ignore this important tool.

Our nation could suffer new waves of COVID-19 in the coming months, which would once again put immense stress on our health-care system. At the same time, Americans are preparing for what could be a "new normal" after current restrictions are eased. The challenges we face in the coming months could include major disruptions to the medical supply chain and barriers to health care access, among many others. Prize competitions can begin to address these obstacles before they become severe. The competitions should begin as "ideation" prizes, rewarding teams that identify and outline looming problems. In the second phase, teams should be awarded prize money for developing solutions to those problems. If the federal government acts now, using its existing authority, these prize competitions could prove invaluable in keeping new crises at bay and helping our nation overcome this extended period of trial.

I look forward to working with you to examine how prize competitions can be utilized to further innovation and save lives as we combat this epidemic. Thank you for your attention to this important matter. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,



Roger F. Wicker
United States Senator