October 27, 2020

The Honorable James Inhofe  
Chairman  
Senate Committee on Armed Services  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Jack Reed  
Ranking Member  
Senate Committee on Armed Services  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Adam Smith  
Chairman  
House Committee on Armed Services  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mac Thornberry  
Ranking Member  
House Committee on Armed Services  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Inhofe, Ranking Member Reed, Chairman Smith, and Ranking Member Thornberry:

On behalf of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) and the Association of Public Health Laboratories (APHL), we write to voice our support for Sec. 2852 of the “William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021” (H.R. 6395), which authorizes the Secretary of Defense to, “proceed with the public infrastructure project in Guam intended to provide a new public health laboratory subject to the availability of funds for this project,” and specifically authorizes $19 million for public health professionals, public health laboratory staff, laboratory and medical equipment, and medical supplies. We look forward to working with Congress to ensure funding in future bills supports the full implementation of this critical resource for the nation’s security.

Currently, the Department of Defense (DoD) relies completely on the government of Guam for its laboratory capacity. Recent events related to the COVID-19 outbreak on the USS Roosevelt and laboratory support needs for sailors reflect the need for continued funding for this level of laboratory.

Investments necessary to implement this plan will be a shared endeavor between the DoD, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the government of Guam. A fire recently destroyed Guam’s public health laboratory and it is now running in a temporary, inadequate facility. The DoD is focused on establishing a permanent, state-of-the-art building to fulfill recommendations for laboratory capacity to support force readiness. The Epidemiological and Laboratory Capacity Program at CDC funded the purchase of a modular laboratory to meet immediate testing needs and especially COVID-19. This is due to come online by the beginning of 2021. The government of Guam and the Department of Public Health and Social Services have committed support for continued staffing and maintenance post-construction. A potential site for the laboratory has been identified that would not require land acquisition.

Current lab services in Guam are not only inefficient, but exorbitant in cost. When capacity of the insufficient laboratory is met, samples are sent off-island, which is logistically burdensome and exacerbates the turnaround times for microbiological procedures and the reporting of results. These capabilities are critical for effective disease control and surveillance of infectious diseases, such as COVID-19, influenza, food-borne infections, measles, and bioterrorism incidents.

Strengthening laboratory testing responsiveness and capacity on the island not only serves the community – military and civilian alike – but enhances a public health early detection, warning, and containment system that is critical to the
United States and international community. Guam is the gateway to the United States and our strategic interests in the Western Pacific. Guam is home to two strategic U.S. bases – Naval Base Guam and Andersen Air Force Base – as well as the Guam Army National Guard.

This funding is a critical first step in developing much-needed public health laboratory infrastructure capable of Biosafety Level 2/3 analytical testing. We look forward to working with you to continue to address this priority. If you have any questions or require additional information, please contact Carolyn McCoy, ASTHO’s senior director of government affairs, at cmccoy@astho.org.

Sincerely,

Michael Fraser, PhD, MS, CAE, FCPP
Chief Executive Officer
Association of State and Territorial Health Officials

Scott J. Becker, MS
Chief Executive Officer
Association of Public Health Laboratories