

June 25, 2020

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman, U.S. Senate Committee on Health,
Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
428 Senate Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member, U.S. Senate Committee on
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
428 Senate Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray,

Thank you for giving the University of Oregon an opportunity to provide feedback to the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions on how our nation will prepare for the next pandemic. As the University of Oregon's Chief Resilience Officer and Associate Vice President for Safety and Risk Services, as well as the founder of the Disaster Resilient Universities® (DRU) Network, I write to convey the importance of our nation's institutions of higher education (IHEs) in emergency management at the local, state, and federal level. The federal government can *Improve State and Local Capacity to Respond* and *Improve Coordination of Federal Agencies During a Public Health Emergency* by adopting the recommendations of the 2016 National Higher Education Emergency Management Program Needs Assessment.

National Higher Education Emergency Management Program Needs Assessment: In 2015, the DRU Network® and the National Center for Campus Public Safety (NCCPS) partnered to conduct [the first national needs assessment of emergency management programs](#) at IHEs in the United States.

The University of Oregon conducted the nationwide survey of colleges and universities, which focused on the spectrum of hazards and events that cause emergencies at IHEs—including infectious diseases—and considered how campuses plan for, respond to, and recover from emergencies. The full assessment can be found [here](#) and an executive summary is also attached. The needs assessment produced the following recommendations:

1. Re-fund the U.S. Department of Education's [Emergency Management for Higher Education \(EMHE\)](#) grant program.
2. Establish an emergency management curriculum and training program targeting executive leadership.
3. Establish an ad hoc working group focused on communication and resource coordination between campus emergency management officials and federal agency representatives.
4. Encourage designation of IHE emergency management coordinators at the state or regional level.
5. Establish an ad hoc working group to develop a program maturity model for institutions' emergency management programs.

Public Health Capabilities – Improve State and Local Capacity to Respond: Around the country, IHEs have had a substantial impact on the capacity of state and localities to respond to COVID-19. For example, the University of Oregon has helped our state and immediate community respond to the COVID-19 threat by gathering PPE for donation early in the crisis, manufacturing face shields using scientific instrumentation, partnering with FEMA and the state to house an N95 mask decontamination system on our campus for community use, and acquiring

equipment and providing expertise for community testing in partnership with McKenzie-Willamette Medical Center, and community monitoring in coordination with the health authority.

In addition, faculty have responded brilliantly to the challenge, securing NSF RAPID grants and philanthropic support to explore pressing questions related to understanding COVID-19. We are very proud of the way our faculty, staff and students are reaching out to serve Oregon and beyond.

While IHEs across the nation have made significant contributions in supporting their communities, adopting the recommendations of the national needs assessment in preparing for the next pandemic will improve the state and local capacity to respond.

The role of a state, regional, or national coordinator would help identify resource needs and to enable a coordinated strategy across the higher education system for public and private institutions. Bringing the campuses together to analyze promising practices and protocols that can be shared across all IHEs to maintain public safety, and prevent, prepare for, and effectively manage future response and recovery efforts for campus-wide crises or emergencies.

Local resources such as government agencies or other IHEs additionally create a valuable network that may increase emergency management capacity, and collaboration among regional partners can address several issues, including plans, response, and the disparity of resources among different types of institutions in a state or region. However, funding appeared as a need in all categories identified in the survey. Funding opportunities would provide improved institutional buy-in, increase the number of training opportunities, provide incentive to improve planning, and could be used to hire dedicated emergency management staff.

To improve the capacity of state and localities to respond to the next pandemic, Congress must consider encouraging the designation of IHE emergency management coordinators at the state, regional, or national level and consider re-funding the U.S. Department of Education's EMHE grant program.

Who Is on the Flagpole? – Improve Coordination of Federal Agencies During a Public Health Emergency: In 2000, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) established the Disaster Resistant Universities pilot initiative, as a recognition of the importance of IHEs in emergency management. The intent of FEMA's initiative was to support university efforts to reduce and manage vulnerability to hazards. The grant program was short-lived; after only one funding cycle, fewer than 20 schools received grant funding for mitigation planning.

When funding was cut, several IHEs kept the core concept of the DRU alive. They saw the need for a practical, common-sense approach to disaster prevention on their campuses. In 2005, the University of Oregon started the DRU Network® listserv. The listserv quickly became the cornerstone of the DRU Network by providing a multidisciplinary, practitioner-based communication resource.

The goal of the [DRU network](#) is to facilitate open communication, discussion, and resource sharing among university/college practitioners of all areas of expertise. A cornerstone of resilience is establishing effective partnerships. The peer-to-peer information sharing among DRU members helps them and others mitigate, prepare for, respond to, operate during, and recover from all types of campus emergencies. As of June 2020, the DRU Network listserv has more than 2200 members.

The network again proved its usefulness during the current pandemic. The University of Oregon established the DRU-Virtual Collaboration Center on February 2, 2020 to assist with resource sharing on COVID-19. We currently have over 1000 members on the DRU-Virtual Collaboration Center. In a show of the continued value of this

peer-to-peer practitioner network, university and college officials involved with responding to the pandemic are sharing information through a Teams site. In addition, the University of Oregon is providing weekly summaries to the listserv and developed a new DRU shared resource index.

The DRU Network, fills a critical need for practitioners charged with ensuring the safety and emergency preparedness of institutions of higher education across the country by offering essential resources, sharing of best practices, and networks at no cost to colleges and universities.

While the DRU Network has established effective partnerships in pursuit of resilience, adopting the recommendations of the national needs assessment in preparing for the next pandemic will improve coordination of federal agencies during a public health emergency.

The survey responses to the national needs assessment show that many emergency managers do not know how to access training and funding opportunities, best practices, or compliance frameworks. By establishing a working group that includes representatives from IHE campus emergency management organizations, the Department of Education, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and others, emergency management professionals can more effectively share ideas about new legislation, regulations, and education policy.

To improve coordination of federal agencies during a public health emergency, Congress must consider establishing an ad hoc working group focused on communication and resource coordination between campus emergency management officials and federal agency representatives.

This interdisciplinary approach to campus risk management, public safety, and emergency preparedness is simple and effective; it leverages our key asset, our people, by connecting and unifying knowledge, skills, and technical assistance to address ever-changing vulnerabilities at universities and colleges. The University of Oregon and the DRU Network are uniquely positioned to offer a common ground and efficient avenues for all who are involved in advancing campus public safety and resilience.

I urge you to consider adopting the recommendations of the 2016 National Higher Education Emergency Management Program Needs Assessment in our nation's preparation for the next pandemic, and I thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

André Le Duc
Chief Resilience Officer and Associate Vice
President of Safety and Risk Services
University of Oregon

Administrator
Disaster Resilient Universities Network