



Peter Franchot  
*Comptroller*

October 29, 2020

**SENT VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL**

The Honorable Larry Hogan  
Governor  
100 State Circle  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401-1991

The Honorable Robert R. Neall  
Secretary of Health  
201 West Preston Street  
Baltimore, Maryland 21201-2399

Dear Governor Hogan and Secretary Neall:

I hope this letter finds you and your families healthy and well.

Last week, an article was published in the *Baltimore Sun* detailing changes in the coronavirus positivity rate calculations being reported from Johns Hopkins University. It indicated that beginning last week, Johns Hopkins University's coronavirus positivity rate for Maryland has been decreasing, but not because the State's percentage of positive cases has declined, but due to changes in data that Maryland is sending to the COVID Tracking Project.

According to *The Sun* article, **“Maryland and Hopkins' rates are now far closer. For data through Tuesday, Maryland had its seven-day rate as 3.2%, compared to Hopkins' 2.36%. Using Hopkins' original methodology, its rate for Maryland in the same timeframe would be 5.98%.”**

My understanding of the reasoning behind this abrupt change in the calculation is because the COVID Tracking Project – a website managed by *The Atlantic* devoted to collecting nationwide COVID-19 information – changed how it maps Maryland's data to now include all viral tests performed, including multiple tests on the same individual. The result of a larger denominator is a smaller positivity rate. Due to changes in the data shared by the Maryland Department of Health to the COVID Tracking Project, Johns Hopkins was forced to alter the way they calculated the rate.

This revelation is troubling and could compromise not only the health and welfare of our residents, but the public confidence in these figures and the global reputation of Johns Hopkins. Policymakers at all levels of government are relying on COVID-related data – including Johns Hopkins' positivity rate calculations – to make decisions on the pace and manner in which we re-open our economy, our schools, and our places of worship. Therefore, it is critical that we have accurate, unbiased reporting measures to guide these important decisions.

Cognizant of the fact that Johns Hopkins is a major recipient of state taxpayer dollars, it was concerning to learn the Hogan Administration had expressed its disapproval of the manner and methodology in which Johns Hopkins previously calculated its positivity rate.

Here in Maryland, we must avoid the type of politicization and manipulation of scientific data that we have seen at the federal level. We must let the facts and science guide our decision-making, and politicians should not have any role in influencing the way positivity rates are reported and the data shared with Johns Hopkins to produce its independent reports.

Our best minds in medicine have warned us of a potential second wave of coronavirus infections, and already, we're seeing spikes in new cases across the country. In Europe, high surges in new cases are requiring their leaders to once again implement lockdowns. Just this past Tuesday, the Maryland Department of Health reported 907 new positive cases in Maryland, the highest daily positivity case total since August 9th. COVID-related hospitalizations are also the highest since early August. Last week, Maryland reported its highest single-day COVID-19 death toll since late August. But Maryland's current positivity rate of 3.36% can lead others to think that Maryland "has turned the corner" in our collective efforts to combat this deadly virus.

Given the absence of a federal standard in how positivity rates are calculated and reported, I would respectfully urge you to consider utilizing different methodologies to ensure these rates are as accurate as possible and to better understand the full scope of this pandemic. After speaking with many medical experts who share my concerns about the way the positivity rate is currently being determined, I strongly encourage the Administration to change how it measures and reports the positivity rate and instead:

1. Report the positivity rates of cases per 100,000 people; and/or
2. Report the positivity rates utilizing a "people over people" method, which is the preference of Johns Hopkins experts. This rate is calculated by dividing the number of individuals testing positive over the total number of people who were tested.

In the interest of transparency and to ensure that we are providing a comprehensive and complete picture of how COVID-19 continues to impact our state, I respectfully urge the Administration to track and report the information outlined above.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Franchot". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Peter Franchot  
Comptroller