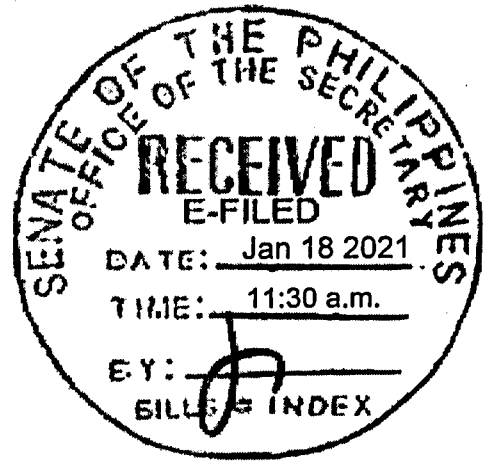


EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS OF THE)
REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES)
Second Regular Session)



SENATE

P.S. Res. No. 612

Introduced by **SENATOR LEILA M. DE LIMA**

RESOLUTION

URGING THE APPROPRIATE SENATE COMMITTEE TO CONDUCT AN INQUIRY, IN AID OF LEGISLATION, ON THE CURRENT STATE OF COVID-19 DIAGNOSTIC TESTING IN THE COUNTRY, WITH THE END IN VIEW OF ASSESSING, RECALIBRATING AND ENHANCING OUR TESTING CAPABILITIES IN LIGHT OF THE NEW STRAINS AND VARIANTS OF THE CORONAVIRUS THAT MAY AFFECT THE QUALITY AND RELIABILITY OF COVID-19 TESTING RESULTS

1 WHEREAS, Article II, Section 15 of the 1987 Constitution states that “the
2 State shall protect and promote the right to health of the people and instill health
3 consciousness among them”;

4 WHEREAS, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that one of the
5 components in effectively combating the COVID-19 pandemic is diagnostic testing.
6 Hence, for the past several months, the government was pushed to scale up our
7 testing capacity by increasing the number of individuals being tested – with a daily
8 average of 30,000 tests per day – and accrediting 181 testing labs across the
9 country;¹

10 WHEREAS, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the WHO
11 received several reports regarding unusual public health events possibly due to
12 confirmed variants of SARS-CoV-2. According to their health bulletin, they are
13 routinely assessing if variants of SARS-CoV-2 result in changes in transmissibility,

¹ Department of Health (11 January 2020) UPDATES ON NOVEL CORONAVIRUS DISEASE (COVID-19). Retrieved 11 January 2021, from: <https://doh.gov.ph/2019-nCoV>. Accessed last 11 January 2021

1 clinical presentation and severity, or if they have an impact on countermeasures,
2 including diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines;²

3 WHEREAS, on 5 January 2021, Hong Kong health officials said they have
4 detected four cases of the United Kingdom (UK) COVID-19 variant known as B117 –
5 believed to be more infectious than the old variant of SARS-CoV2 – in their country.
6 Among the cases was a 30-year-old female Hong Kong resident, who returned from
7 Manila on 22 December 2020;³

8 WHEREAS, following the reported case in Hong Kong of the UK COVID-19
9 variant detected in a traveler from the Philippines, a statement released by the
10 Department of Health (DOH) and the Philippine Genome Center (PGC) claimed that
11 this variant had yet to be detected in the Philippines after running a genome
12 sequencing on 305 samples of inbound travelers and hospital admissions from
13 November to December last year that tested positive for the disease upon the
14 person's arrival in the country;⁴

15 WHEREAS, on 8 January 2021, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
16 released a warning to clinical laboratory staff and clinicians about the potential risk
17 for false negative results with molecular tests for SARS-CoV-2 due to mutations and
18 advised them to consider such results in combination with clinical observations, and
19 repeat testing with a different test if COVID-19 was still suspected;⁵

20 WHEREAS, Dr. John Wong of the DOH's technical advisory working group
21 studying the coronavirus outbreak in the country warned the UK COVID-19 variant
22 has the dangerous potential of increasing the cases in the Philippines by 15-fold or
23 around 300,000;⁶

24 WHEREAS, acknowledging the risks of the UK COVID-19 variant, the DOH
25 informed the public that they will be monitoring the matter. However, not long after

² World Health Organization (31 December 2020) *Disease Outbreak News: SARS-CoV-2 Variants*. Retrieved 11 January 2021, from: <https://www.who.int/csr/don/31-december-2020-sars-cov2-variants/en/>

³ Galvez, D. (6 January 2021) *Hong Kong detects new coronavirus variant in passenger from PH*. Retrieved 11 January 2021, from: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1379994/hong-kong-detects-new-covid-variant-in-passenger-from-ph>

⁴ Magsambol, B (6 January 2021) DOH, *Genome Center: No new COVID-19 variant yet in PH*. Retrieved 11 January 2021, from: <https://www.rappler.com/nation/doh-genome-center-report-no-new-covid-19-variant-yet-philippines-january-6-2021>

⁵ Kerry Dooley Young. (January 08, 2021). *FDA Warns of False Negative COVID Tests From Virus Mutations*. Medscape. Retrieved 11 January 2021, from: <https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/943845>

⁶ Magsambol, B. (6 January 2021) *Expert says new COVID-19 variant may spike PH cases by 15-fold*. Retrieved 11 January 2021, from: <https://www.rappler.com/nation/expert-says-new-covid-19-variant-may-increase-cases-philippines>

1 the world was struck with the news of the more infectious UK COVID-19 variant, a
2 new variant originating from South Africa and Malaysia have likewise surfaced.
3 Prompting the DOH to monitor these new variants, on top of trying to manage the
4 continued increase of the COVID-19 cases in the PH;⁷

5 WHEREAS, on 10 January 2021, Japan announced that a new COVID-19
6 variant has been detected in four travelers from Brazil's Amazonas state. Japan's
7 health ministry revealed that the new strain differs from the variants first found in
8 Britain and South Africa, and that studies were underway into the efficacy of vaccines
9 against the newly discovered variant. Brazil's Health Ministry said it has been
10 notified by Japanese authorities that the new variant has 12 mutations, one of which
11 is also present in the variants found in the U.K. and South Africa.
12 "It implies a potential higher virus infectiousness," it said. Brazil is experiencing a
13 second wave of coronavirus infections, with a daily average of more than 50,000
14 people testing positive for the virus in January;⁸

15 WHEREAS, as the world grapples with the challenges of rolling out urgently
16 needed COVID-19 vaccines, health authorities are now facing another major hurdle:
17 a more contagious form of coronavirus. With the evidence of the variant being more
18 contagious mounting, the State must gear up in order to be ahead of the situation,
19 lest it becomes too late;

20 WHEREAS, the first case of the UK COVID-19 variant has already been
21 documented in the Philippines on 13 January 2021;⁹

22 WHEREAS, it is better to be proactive than reactive given the uncertainty and
23 imminent threats of these recent developments;

24 WHEREAS, it is vital that we heed the opinion of scientific and medical
25 experts that warn us that SARS-CoV-2 virus can mutate over time, resulting in
26 genetic variation in the population of circulating viral strains. In recognizing this
27 inevitable event, the State must be ready in combatting new strains that are already

⁷ Magsambol, B. (8 January 2021). *Aside from UK COVID-19 variant, DOH monitoring 2 other virus mutations*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.rappler.com/nation/doh-monitoring-other-covid-19-mutations>

⁸ The Japan Times. (11 January 2021). *Another new coronavirus variant found in Japan*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/01/11/national/science-health/new-coronavirus-variant-japan/>

⁹ Limpot, Kristel. CNN Philippines. *New COVID-19 variant from UK detected in PH*. (13 January 2021). Retrieved from: <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/1/13/new-UK-coronavirus-variant-detected-PH.html>

1 here and could arise in the future to avoid further exacerbating our medical
2 frontliners who have been making the ultimate sacrifice in stemming the spread of
3 the virus;

4 WHEREAS, while the rollout of the much-anticipated vaccine program is on
5 the way, it must not cause a slackened approach to other factors that help mitigate
6 the spread of the virus such as testing, especially when studies have reported that a
7 cluster circulating in Europe in August and September 2020, is related to a variant
8 with four genetic changes, three substitutions and one deletion, in the spike (S)
9 protein. Hence, the State must not let its guard down amid warnings made by experts
10 that such mutations could, in theory, have implications for viral fitness (ability to
11 infect humans and animals), transmissibility, and antigenicity, as well as to
12 treatment, certain diagnostic tests, and virus antigenicity. Some even warn that it
13 could also have an impact on the effectiveness of developed vaccine candidates, and
14 possibly require them to be updated;¹⁰

15 WHEREAS, while investigations and studies are ongoing to clarify the extent
16 of these possible implications, the State must continue to ensure that our testing
17 capabilities are regularly assessed and recalibrated to respond to the times;

18 WHEREAS, it is thus imperative to evaluate and assess our current diagnostic
19 testing protocols, processes and technologies on COVID-19 in light of the emergence
20 of COVID-19 variants and strains that may affect the reliability and integrity of
21 COVID-19 test results;

22 WHEREAS, there is a need to conduct a Senate inquiry into these matters to
23 ensure that our testing capabilities and results are reliable and up to date in order to
24 preserve the health and safety of the general public and ensure that the health
25 protocols in place are still effective and responsive;

26 WHEREAS, it is also prudent to inform the public, through a Senate inquiry,
27 how the DOH and Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-
28 EID) is preparing our health system in the eventuality that new and potentially more
29 infectious variants of COVID-19 are detected in the country and further transmission
30 occurs;

¹⁰ European Center for Disease Prevention and Control. (12 November 2020). *Detection of new SARS-CoV-2 variants related to mink*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/RRA-SARS-CoV-2-in-mink-12-nov-2020.pdf>

1 NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE, to urge the
2 appropriate Senate Committee to conduct an inquiry, in aid of legislation, on the
3 current state of our COVID-19 diagnostic testing, with the end in view of assessing,
4 recalibrating and enhancing our diagnostic testing capabilities in light of the new
5 strains and variants of the Coronavirus that may affect the quality and reliability of
6 COVID-19 testing results.

Adopted,


BEILA M. DE LIMA