Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

October 8, 2020

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
United States Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

We are writing to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conduct a comprehensive review of current government agency advertising expenditures.

The current COVID-19 pandemic has shown that when our country faces our largest challenges, one of our greatest needs is access to reliable news and information. Local news publishers (print and digital) and broadcast stations around the country are operating as essential businesses during this crisis to make sure American citizens are adequately informed of the government's public health and economic response, as well as what individuals can do to protect themselves and others.

However, at the exact moment in which local news publishers and broadcasters are needed the most in their communities, local advertising revenue—which sustains local journalism—has declined dramatically. Expressing concern over the viability of local media during and after this crisis, more than 240 members of the House of Representatives and 74 members of the Senate sent letters to President Trump and the Office of Management and Budget, respectively, requesting that the Administration direct federal agencies throughout the government to shift existing government advertising expenditures to local news publishers and broadcast stations.

The U.S. government spends a substantial amount of money on advertising. In 2016, the GAO provided an evaluation of federal government spending on advertising and public relations across agencies from 2006 to 2015, which averaged nearly $1 billion.

We request that the GAO update this evaluation of federal government expenditures on advertising for Fiscal Years 2015 to 2020, and explore additional issues. Specifically, we request that the GAO study the following matters and provide recommendations as appropriate:

1. How much is the federal government spending on advertising?
2. What is the breakdown of advertising expenditures across federal government agencies?
3. Where are federal agencies placing these advertisements (e.g. national television, local television, local radio, national newspapers, local newspapers, digital news sites, Internet search engines such as Google, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, etc.)?

4. Who are the media buyers for each agency that are responsible for placing the advertisements?
5. How can federal agencies be encouraged to place more advertising with local news publishers and broadcast stations?
6. What are the private sector mechanisms in place that would make it efficient for federal agencies to place advertisements with local news publishers and broadcast stations in markets of all sizes?

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. If you have any additional questions, please contact Yusuf Nekzad (yusuf.nekzad@mail.house.gov) in Rep. Bustos' office or Gregor Catto (gregor.catto@mail.house.gov) in Rep. Aderholt's office.

Sincerely,

Cheri Bustos
Member of Congress

Robert Aderholt
Member of Congress