

House resolution pushes deeper check into OCTA'S background, ties with UP

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FIVE lawmakers have filed a resolution asking the House Committee on Good Government to conduct an inquiry on OCTA Research Philippines, an independent research group, on its qualification, research methodologies for its projections and warnings about the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

In filing House Resolution 2075 last Tuesday, the lawmakers urged the committee to conduct an inquiry, in aid of legislation, to ascertain the credentials and background of the research group.

These are Deputy Speakers Bernadette Herrera (Bagong Henerasyon Party-list), Kristine Singsonmeehan (Ilocos Sur, 2nd District), and Sharon Garin (AAMBIS-OWA Party-list); Deputy Minority Leader Stella Luz Quimbo (Marikina, 2nd District), and Rep. Jesus Suntay (Quezon City, Fourth District).

Beginning last year, the lawmakers said, a number of media outlets have cited warnings published by OCTA, with the latest one pushing for a “circuit breaker,” or hard lockdown this month.

“There is a public health and public policy need to ensure the safety and security of the population during this pandemic, and that information being distributed is correct and are not irresponsibly and erroneously published,” the resolution said.

Lawmakers also underscored the need to “validate the connection between OCTA Research and the University of the Philippines System, as the former publicized a partnership which the latter seemingly denied.”

The lawmakers said previous infographics and press releases across news outlets and social-media platforms refer to the “University of the Philippines-octa” group (UP-OCTA) or the “UP-OCTA Research Team” in predicting surges of Covid-19 cases. Moreover, OCTA Research fellow Professor Ranjit Rye has been quoted to refer to the group as the “UP-OCTA Research Team.”

However, the lawmakers said UP-diliman Associate Professor Peter Cayton emphasized in one news report that there is no office within the oct a, and that it does “not exist in UP'S organizational structure .”

Based on their web site, OCTA describes itself as a “polling, research and consultation firm” that provides “comprehensive, holistic, accurate, rigorous, and insightful data analysis to help our clients in government, the private sector and the NGO community.”

The lawmakers said it further indicates that OCTA specializes in public opinion research, qualitative and quantitative research, policy research and advocacy, and training and capacity building.

They added the Department of Health (DOH) and a member of the government's Technical Advisory Group on Covid-19 has advised the group to “apply circumspection in making pandemic-related statements, in order to minimize public panic.”

“The main problem with OCTA’S case projection model is that it is based on cases reported in the last two weeks,” noted infectious disease expert Dr. Edsel Salvana.

“Even a student of clinical epidemiology will tell you that that is not valid because cases that happened within the last two weeks are subject to error, because some get tested later or earlier. There are backlogs, so if you are making projections based on data that is incomplete or erroneous, you are going to come out with erroneous projections,” he said.