

January 8, 2025

The Honorable Bill Cassidy, M.D., Chair
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bernie Sanders, Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
Washington, DC 20510

Re: HHS leadership and the importance of vaccines to the health of Americans

Dear Chair Cassidy & Ranking Member Sanders:

On behalf of the 73 undersigned organizations, we would like to underscore the vital role vaccines play in our health and protection from contagious diseases. It is critically important that those entrusted with safeguarding the health of Americans firmly believe in the science behind vaccines and their proven ability to protect public health.

Immunization is recognized as one of the most significant public health milestones of the 20th century, contributing to improved health and increased life expectancy of Americans. Vaccines have made life-threatening diseases such as polio, smallpox, measles, mumps, and rubella rare. They create immunologic memory, enabling the immune system to respond quickly and neutralize pathogens before they cause infection. Global immunization efforts have saved an estimated 154 million lives over the past 50 years—equivalent to 6 lives every minute, every year. Of these, 101 million were the lives of infants.¹

Immunocompromised individuals are particularly vulnerable to infections like measles, pertussis (whooping cough), COVID-19, RSV, and the flu, often experiencing more severe outcomes compared to the general population.² In the U.S., 6.2% of adults under the age of 65 and 2.6% of children have compromised immune systems.³ This means that 14 million people under 65, including two million children, have immune systems that don't function properly. Unfortunately, people with immunocompromising conditions are often unable to mount adequate protective responses to vaccines directly, so they rely on the immunity of others to shield them from contagious diseases.

Vaccines not only protect those who receive them but also contribute to broader community immunity. Community immunity refers to the threshold when enough individual people in a community are immune to a disease that the disease cannot spread within that community. Community immunity is essential in safeguarding the most vulnerable members of society, like infants, the elderly, and individuals with compromised immune systems.

¹ <https://www.who.int/news/item/24-04-2024-global-immunization-efforts-have-saved-at-least-154-million-lives-over-the-past-50-years>

² <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/mm7127a3.htm>

³ https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/8/19-1493_article

Years of assuming diseases like polio, measles, and whooping cough are eradicated have led to complacency and a significant drop in community immunity. Additionally, the rise in false claims surrounding vaccines has led many people to distance themselves from what was once a widely accepted and non-controversial practice. The decline in vaccine rates has resulted in a rise in vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks, including measles and pertussis, across all age groups. For example, despite being declared eliminated in the U.S. in 2000, there was an outbreak of measles in 2019 in an orthodox Jewish community in New York. Because vaccination rates of young children had dropped to 79.5%, significantly lower than the 95% estimated to provide community immunity to measles, more than 600 people were infected.^{4,5} The outbreak response was resource intensive and the outbreak caused serious illness, particularly among unvaccinated children.⁶ Vaccination is key to preventing these serious health threats and protecting vulnerable populations.

No medical treatment is without risk, and vaccines are no exception. However, a robust set of processes and systems are in place to ensure that vaccines used in the U.S. do not pose undue risk to those receiving them. First, all vaccines go through the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval process, including reviewing safety data from multiple clinical trials. In addition, the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System, run by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), provides a robust post-approval mechanism to track side effects that may be linked to vaccines. A 2021 report from the Agency for Healthcare Quality and Research (AHQR) found that serious adverse events, such as life-threatening allergic reactions, following vaccination were rare across more than 300 different studies, demonstrating that these systems work.⁶

It is essential that the incoming Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services support and uphold the evidence-based science around the value of vaccines to safeguard our communities, especially those who are immunocompromised and need community immunity to remain healthy. The risks associated with declining vaccination rates are too great and compromise the health and safety of millions of Americans.

We offer our engagement and expertise and urge the committee to ensure that the confirmed secretary will collaborate with our organizations to protect the health and safety of the patients that we represent. Please contact Lynn Albizo (lalbizo@primaryimmune.org) for additional information, or to set up a follow-up conversation.

Respectfully,

Immune Deficiency Foundation
American Kidney Fund
The AIDS Institute
Autoimmune Association

⁴ <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241503396>

⁵ <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa1912514>

⁶ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK572041/>

Ability Connection Colorado
AIDS Foundation Chicago
Alliance for Aging Research
Alpha-1 Foundation
ALS Association
American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology
American Pharmacists Association
Andrews County Health Department
Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology (APIC)
Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America
Avery's Hope
Biomarker Collaborative
California Chronic Care Coalition
CancerCare
Child Neurology Foundation
Chronic Care Collaborative
Chronic Care Policy Alliance
Colorectal Cancer Alliance
COPD Foundation
Cure CMD
CURE GABA-A
Cystic Fibrosis Foundation
Dravet Syndrome Foundation
El Grupo Vida
Eosinophilic & Rare Disease Cooperative
Erie Family Health Centers
Exon 20 Group
Family Voices NJ
Foundation for Sarcoidosis Research
GBS|CIDP Foundation International
Global Liver Institute
HealthHIV
HealthyWomen
Hemophilia Federation of America
HIV Medicine Association
ICAN, International Cancer Advocacy Network
Immunize Colorado
Immunocompromised Association
Infectious Diseases Society of America
International Pemphigus & Pemphigoid Foundation
Juju and Friends CLN2 Warrior Foundation
Latino Commission on AIDS
Lupus and Allied Diseases Association, Inc.
Maine Parent Federation
MET Crusaders
Mother and Child Alliance

NASWTX (National Asso. of Social Workers, TX Chapter)
National Alliance for Caregiving
National Bleeding Disorders Foundation
National Caucus and Center on Black Aging
National Center for Parent Leadership, Advocacy, and Community Empowerment (National PLACE)
National Consumers League
National Fabry Disease Foundation
National Kidney Foundation
National MPS Society, Inc.
The Parents' Place of MD
PD-L1 Amplifieds
PEAK Parent Center
Platelet Disorder Support Association
Prevent Blindness
Pulmonary Hypertension Association
PWSA | USA - Prader-Willi Syndrome Association
RetireSafe
SCID Foundation
Sepsis Alliance
SPAN Parent Advocacy Network
Transplant Recipients and Immunocompromised Patient Advocacy Group
United MSD Foundation
Wiskott-Aldrich Foundation