

AMY KLOBUCHAR  
MINNESOTA

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RULES AND ADMINISTRATION

United States Senate  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 22, 2020

The Honorable Alex Azar  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

I write to express my concern about the decline of routine immunizations in Minnesota during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and to request information about the steps that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is taking to address this concerning trend.

As you know, the coronavirus pandemic continues to pose a significant public health threat in the United States. As of June 21, there have been more than 2.2 million confirmed cases of the virus and over 119,000 deaths in the U.S., including over 32,000 cases and 1,300 deaths in Minnesota.<sup>1</sup> Given the unprecedented and persistent nature of this outbreak, it is critical that HHS and other federal agencies take all possible actions to safeguard the health of Americans and combat the spread of preventable diseases during this public health crisis.

While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has affirmed the importance of continuing to administer immunizations to children during the coronavirus pandemic, recent reports have indicated that the number of routine vaccinations for children has declined significantly during the pandemic – including a 70 percent decrease in measles vaccine doses given to children in Minnesota compared to a year ago.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, a CDC report released on May 15 showed a “notable decrease” in orders for childhood vaccinations in the United States during the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>3</sup> If this trend of decreased vaccinations continues, we could see a resurgence of vaccine-preventable – but still highly contagious – diseases at a time when our public health system is already strained in response to the pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University (Accessed on June 17, 2020). Johns Hopkins University. Retrieved from <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> and Situation Update for COVID-19 (Accessed June 17, 2020). Minnesota Department of Health. Retrieved from <https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/situation.html>

<sup>2</sup> Interim Guidance for Immunization Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic (Accessed June 17, 2020). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pandemic-guidance/index.html> and Howatt, Glenn. (May 10, 2020). *Minnesota's child vaccinations drop amid COVID-19 fears*. The Star Tribune. Retrieved from <https://m.startribune.com/child-vaccinations-drop-amid-covid-19-fears/570356081/>

<sup>3</sup> Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Routine Pediatric Vaccine Ordering and Administration — United States, 2020 (Accessed June 17, 2020). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6919e2.htm>

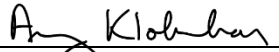
I am also concerned that the lower rate of immunizations could carry over to the fall and lead to a more severe flu season than usual. This is especially concerning because many symptoms of coronavirus closely mirror those of the flu – including respiratory problems and fever – which may make it difficult for people to distinguish between the two viruses. Many people with the flu may be compelled to seek diagnostic testing for coronavirus and require clinics and hospitals to use other resources – such as protective equipment – that would otherwise be reserved for those with coronavirus infections.

Accordingly, I request your response to the following questions to better understand HHS' efforts to address the reported decline in vaccinations during the coronavirus pandemic and prepare for the upcoming flu season:

1. What steps is HHS taking to communicate with the public, including state and local leaders, about the importance of continuing to get routine immunizations during the coronavirus pandemic?
2. Given the sharp reduction in some vaccination rates in Minnesota, are other states experiencing similar declines? If so, how does this affect the likelihood of outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases?
3. What steps is your agency taking to prepare for the upcoming flu season and to encourage Americans to get the flu vaccine this fall?

Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter. I look forward to working you to ensure that Americans receive the vaccinations they need to stay healthy during the coronavirus pandemic.

Sincerely,

  
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Amy Klobuchar  
United States Senator

Cc: Director Robert Redfield, MD, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Commissioner Stephen Hahn, Food and Drug Administration