

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 16, 2021

Dr. Rochelle Walensky  
Director  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
1600 Clifton Road  
Atlanta, GA 30329

Dear Director Walensky:

We write to encourage the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to take additional action to ensure that older Americans—including seniors who may not have access to broadband or other necessary technology—can access appointment and scheduling systems for coronavirus vaccines.

As you know, this pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on older adults. They are at a higher risk of serious illness if infected and account for 80 percent of all coronavirus-related deaths.<sup>1</sup> The impact is not just physical—in July 2020, nearly 50 percent of older adults reported that coronavirus-related stress had a negative impact on their mental health, up from 31 percent in May 2020, closer to the beginning of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> In recognition of this, the CDC’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommended the prioritization of older adults in its proposed Phase 1b and 1c of vaccine distribution.<sup>3</sup>

However, the majority of all coronavirus vaccination appointments are currently scheduled online—exposing a critical generational digital divide that threatens to limit access to vaccines for some of the most vulnerable populations. Nearly 1 in 3 seniors in the United States do not use the internet, and many that do struggle to use it effectively.<sup>4</sup> For seniors who have access to an online appointment portal, other issues persist, including registration websites frequently crashing due to overloads of traffic, challenges creating registration accounts, and glitches where available appointments vanish before applicants can enter all of their information to register.<sup>5</sup> These issues are compounded by the fact that nearly 22 million—or 42 percent—of American seniors lack broadband access at home, while many others do not own a working computer.<sup>6</sup>

The CDC plays a critical role in overseeing the nation’s response to the coronavirus pandemic and is uniquely positioned to work with states to implement effective and equitable systems to schedule and administer vaccines. We appreciate the Administration’s work to examine various

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (February 26, 2021). *Older Adults: At greater risk of requiring hospitalization or dying if diagnosed with COVID-19.* <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Koma Wyatt et al. (October 9, 2021). *One in Four Older Adults Report Anxiety or Depression Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic.* Kaiser Family Foundation. <https://www.kff.org/medicare/issue-brief/one-in-four-older-adults-report-anxiety-or-depression-amid-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (February 19, 2021). *CDC’s COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout Recommendations.* <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/recommendations.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson, Monica et al. (April 22, 2019). *10% of Americans don’t use the internet. Who are they?* Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/22/some-americans-dont-use-the-internet-who-are-they/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ovide, Shira. (January 12, 2021). *The Problem With Vaccine Websites.* The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/12/technology/the-problem-with-vaccine-websites.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Older Adults Technology Services. (2020). *Aging Connected: Exposing the Hidden Connectivity Crisis for Older Adult.* <https://agingconnected.org/report/>.

options for a centralized vaccine scheduling and appointment system for Americans, including the elderly, to access vaccines.<sup>7</sup> We urge the CDC to consider all available options and resources to ensure that people can navigate and access vaccine scheduling systems, and we look forward to working with the Administration to ensure the success of a federally-supported vaccination website and call center to address some of the barriers to accessing vaccines.<sup>8</sup>

The progress made in developing multiple safe and highly effective vaccines to fight the coronavirus in less than a year is nothing short of a medical marvel. We must now take steps to ensure these vaccines are accessible—and that begins by making sure all Americans, including older adults, have access to vaccination appointment systems.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

/S/ Amy Klobuchar  
Amy Klobuchar  
United States Senator

/S/ Margaret Wood Hassan  
Margaret Wood Hassan  
United States Senator

/S/ Tammy Duckworth  
Tammy Duckworth  
United States Senator

/S/ Jacky Rosen  
Jacky Rosen  
United States Senator

/S/ Tina Smith  
Tina Smith  
United States Senator

/S/ Jon Tester  
Jon Tester  
United States Senator

/S/ Mark Kelly  
Mark Kelly  
United States Senator

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<sup>7</sup> The White House. (March 1, 2021). *Press Briefing by White House COVID-19 Response Team and Public Health Officials*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/03/01/press-briefing-by-white-house-covid-19-response-team-and-public-health-officials-9/>; The White House. (March 2, 2021). *Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/03/02/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-march-2-2021/>.

<sup>8</sup> The White House. (March 11, 2021). *Fact Sheet: President Biden to Announce All Americans to be Eligible for Vaccinations by May 1, Puts the Nation on a Path to Get Closer to Normal by July 4th*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/11/fact-sheet-president-biden-to-announce-all-americans-to-be-eligible-for-vaccinations-by-may-1-puts-the-nation-on-a-path-to-get-closer-to-normal-by-july-4th/>.