

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

February 21, 2017

Dear Colleagues,

We write to you today to highlight the importance of immunizations, which protect Americans, especially infants and children, against outbreaks of serious and deadly infectious diseases. Vaccines save lives.

The introduction of vaccines was a turning point in our country's public health history. Vaccines led to the elimination of certain diseases, including polio and measles, from the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), before introduction of the polio vaccine in the United States, polio caused more than 16,000 cases of paralysis and nearly 2,000 deaths each year, on average.¹ Similarly, before the introduction of the measles vaccine in 1963, almost all children got measles by the age of 15, with up to 4 million Americans infected each year, according to the CDC. Measles is a highly contagious, airborne virus that can cause serious respiratory illness and life-threatening complications in children, such as pneumonia, ear infections, and even lifelong brain damage or deafness.² In 2000, as a result of a vaccine, the CDC declared measles to be eliminated in the United States.³ The pertussis vaccine is yet another example: Pertussis, also known as "whooping cough," is a bacterial infection that can be life-threatening in infants and young children, especially in children under one year, causing half of them to be hospitalized.⁴ The pertussis vaccine provides protection against the illness even among newborns who receive protective antibodies when their mother is vaccinated.⁵

Yet, already this year, states and communities around the country have reported outbreaks of measles, mumps, and whooping cough. The reasons for each outbreak vary, but we know that there are increasing trends around the country that have led to lower vaccination rates in some communities, allowing outbreaks of infectious diseases to take hold with increasing frequency.⁶ In 2014, for example, the United States had 667 measles cases in 27 states—a record high since the CDC declared the disease eliminated from the U.S. in 2000. These outbreaks have affected too many children and families, and they have presented unique challenges to doctors and health care providers—many of whom have only read about such illnesses in textbooks—as well as to the public health officials who seek to control outbreaks in each of our states.

The reemergence of vaccine-preventable diseases in the United States presents a public health threat, especially for those who rely on "herd immunity," which means protection from disease

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00056803.htm>

² <https://www.cdc.gov/measles/about/complications.html>

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/measles/about/history.html>

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/fast-facts.html>

⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/pregnant/mom/get-vaccinated.html>

⁶ <https://www.cdc.gov/washington/testimony/2015/t20150210.htm> and <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2015/01/13/peds.2014-2715>

through the vaccination of those around you. Herd immunity protects vulnerable individuals who cannot be vaccinated, including children who may be too young to receive a vaccination or those who have medical conditions. Herd immunity lessens the opportunity for an outbreak because it ensures a large portion of a community is immunized against a contagious disease.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) plays a critical role in rigorously reviewing vaccines and ensuring they are safe and effective, based on extensive testing. After FDA approval of vaccines, the CDC, based on expert advice from the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, may provide recommendations for immunization schedules designed to protect individuals in the United States, including infants and children, and those most vulnerable to life-threatening diseases. These schedules are safe and approved by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.⁷ All 50 states have laws regarding immunization requirements for certain vaccines for children, with varying exemptions for medical, religious, or personal beliefs.⁸

Vaccines are our first line of defense against infectious diseases, many of which have no treatment or can be life-threatening. As medical research continues to advance, and scientists discover new medical breakthroughs and cutting-edge ways to treat disease and save lives, it is critical to recognize the importance of protecting public health against vaccine-preventable diseases. The science is clear: FDA-licensed vaccines are proven to be safe and effective, and save the lives both of those who receive them and vulnerable individuals around them. As Members of Congress, we have a critical role to play in supporting the availability and use of vaccines to protect Americans from deadly diseases.

We hope that you will consider the sound scientific information available, the public health challenges of disease outbreaks, and the successful examples of infectious disease prevention. Simply put, vaccines save lives. For additional information about vaccines, please have your staff contact members of our staff or refer to these evidence-based sources of information: CDC, <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/index.html>; or U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <https://www.vaccines.gov/>.

Sincerely,



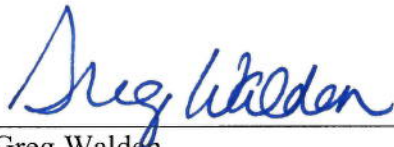
Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Senate HELP Committee



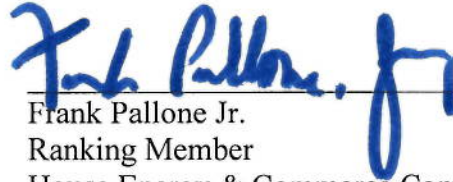
Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Senate HELP Committee

⁷ <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/schedules/hcp/child-adolescent.html>

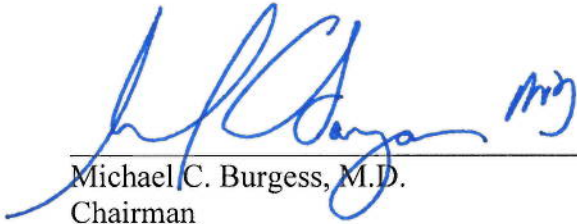
⁸ <http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/school-immunization-exemption-state-laws.aspx>



Greg Walden
Chairman
House Energy & Commerce Committee



Frank Pallone Jr.
Ranking Member
House Energy & Commerce Committee



Michael C. Burgess, M.D.
Chairman
House Energy & Commerce
Subcommittee on Health



Gene Green
Ranking Member
House Energy & Commerce
Subcommittee on Health