

NACCHO

National Association of County & City Health Officials

The National Connection for Local Public Health

March 5, 2019

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Committee on Health, Education, Labor
and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and
and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray

On behalf of the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), representing the nearly 3,000 local health departments across the country, I write to thank you for highlighting the importance of immunizations to keeping our communities healthy through the hearing entitled, “Vaccines Save Lives: What Is Driving Preventable Disease Outbreaks?” Local health departments are on the front lines responding to emerging health threats, including vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks.

Vaccines are a cost-effective tool for protecting children and adults against serious and potentially fatal diseases.¹ Vaccines have been proven to be safe and highly effective at reducing disease rates when public health recommendations are followed. Immunization has been one of the most successful public health measures available to populations worldwide, with an unparalleled record of disease reduction and prevention. This is not just an issue about children. Vaccines across the lifespan are important, life-saving measures, particularly in our efforts to protect those who are at-risk or most vulnerable to contracting a vaccine-preventable disease.

Local health departments are key participants in our nation’s immunization infrastructure, with 90% of departments reporting that they participate in direct immunization efforts.² Beyond service delivery, local health departments also promote the importance of immunizations through education and policy, and they monitor, prevent, and control disease to reduce the health risks and financial burden of infectious disease cases and outbreaks. Local health departments also use community, provider, and school-based immunization coverage rates to assess and ensure protection against vaccine-preventable diseases.

However, there are real and perceived barriers to achieving optimal immunization rates to keep outbreaks at bay and our communities thriving. According to NACCHO’s 2017 National Assessment of

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (1999). Impact of vaccines universally recommended for children — United States, 1900–1998. *MMWR*, 48(12), 243–248.

² See NACCHO’s 2018 Forces of Change Report, available at <http://nacchoprofilestudy.org/forces-of-change/>



Local Health Department Immunization Programs, over half of local health department respondents report vaccine hesitancy as a barrier to their immunization programs, with lack of vaccine education and confidence also noted as barriers.³ Local health departments play a significant role in communicating with parents about the importance of vaccination, and often provide training to healthcare providers on how to strongly recommend vaccines, such as the human papillomavirus and influenza vaccines.

While vaccine hesitancy puts many at risk, it is not the only factor contributing to lower vaccination rates. The CDC recently released a study examining vaccination coverage for children age 19 to 35 months, which found that the percentage of children under two years of age who had not received any vaccination quadrupled during the last 17 years, with the lowest coverage among uninsured children and children living in rural areas. The researchers offered two reasons for this change: access and affordability. Some families believe they simply cannot afford to vaccinate their child. For others, there is no hospital, health department, medical center, or pediatrician close to home to facilitate access to them.

Unfortunately, while working to address these barriers, many local health departments are operating at a diminished capacity due to budget pressures on federal, state, and local governments. In the area of immunization, that means that there are fewer epidemiologists to track the spread of diseases and identify pockets of underserved areas within the community with lower vaccination coverage rates. There are also fewer nurses to staff immunization clinics, provide vaccines, and conduct outreach within communities. As several states and counties across the nation are currently experiencing outbreaks of vaccine-preventable disease, it is important that we continue promote vaccine confidence, while continuing to work to improve access and affordability.

Simply put: vaccines are the best defense against the threat of vaccine preventable diseases and play a vital role in protecting the health of communities. Immunization has been one of the most successful and safest public health measures available to populations worldwide, with an unparalleled record of disease reduction and prevention. The success of vaccines highlights the importance of continued vigilance in promoting vaccine confidence and access.

Given this evidence, NACCHO strongly urges all levels of government to collaborate with community stakeholders in addressing misinformation about vaccine safety and lack of accessibility to immunization services. We support strong immunization requirements to maintain high immunization rates and protect communities from vaccine-preventable diseases.⁴ We call on the federal government to continue support for local efforts to protect people from disease through high rates of immunization.

Thank you again for raising the issue of vaccine-preventable disease amid the ongoing measles outbreaks and looks forward to working with Congress to address this problem. Please contact Adriane

³ See "Local Health Department Immunization Programs: Findings from a 2017 NACCHO Assessment," available at <https://essentialelements.naccho.org/archives/10940>

⁴ See NACCHO's Policy Statement, "School and Child Care Immunization Requirements," available at <https://www.naccho.org/uploads/downloadable-resources/16-01-School-and-Child-Care-Immunization-Requirements.pdf>

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Sincerely,



Lori Tremmel Freeman, MBA
Chief Executive Officer

