



National Association of County & City Health Officials

The National Connection for Local Public Health

August 8, 2019

The Honorable Kim Schrier, MD
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Michael Burgess, MD
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representatives Schrier and Burgess:

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 introducing the bipartisan Vaccine Awareness Campaign to Champion Immunization Nationally and Enhance Safety (VACCINES) Act (H.R.2862). Your legislation highlights the importance of immunization infrastructure by aiming to identify communities at risk for vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks, help educate the public, and combat misinformation about the safety of vaccines. NACCHO strongly supports the VACCINES Act and its goal to protect and promote the health and well-being for all people in their communities through immunization.

As you are aware, many communities across the country are facing record outbreaks of preventable diseases such as measles. As of August 1, 2019, nearly 1,200 cases of measles across 30 U.S. states have been reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)—the highest annual number of measles cases since 1992.ⁱ While measles is in many of the headlines, the impact of vaccine-preventable diseases is far greater than one disease—communities across the country are also responding to Hepatitis A outbreaks and about 80,000 Americans died from the flu in the 2017-2018 season.^{ii,iii} Vaccines are the best defense against these costly and dangerous diseases.

Vaccines are one of the most successful public health measures available to populations worldwide, with an unparalleled record of disease reduction and prevention. 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 Local Health Department Immunization Programs, over half of local health department respondents report vaccine hesitancy—the delay or refusal of vaccines despite their availability—as a barrier to their immunization programs, with lack of vaccine education and confidence also noted as barriers.^{iv} Moreover, the rise in vaccine-preventable disease incidences can be linked to increases in communities with low vaccination rates. Nonmedical exemptions from state vaccine mandates are also associated with higher rates of vaccine preventable disease and are primarily attributed to vaccine hesitancy. Additionally, real and perceived access and cost barriers to care continue to contribute to lower vaccination rates.^v 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.

Local health departments are key participants in our nation's immunization infrastructure, with 90% of departments directly providing immunization services across the human lifespan and promoting the importance of immunizations and vaccine confidence through the education and training of patients, families, and healthcare providers.^{vi} Beyond service delivery, 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.



They 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 data to assess and ensure protection against vaccine-preventable diseases.

The VACCINES Act would help identify areas at risk of vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks so that public health efforts can be targeted to the needs of the specific communities at risk. It would also encourage the federal government identify ways to better address vaccine hesitancy and implement evidence-based public education campaigns on the importance of vaccines, while leveraging partnerships with local public health departments. It also represents an important opportunity to leverage and strengthen our nation's existing immunization information systems and to improve data collection and analysis across the country to find areas vulnerable to an outbreak and focus efforts to the communities most in need.

This is not just an issue about children. Vaccines across the lifespan are important, lifesaving measures, particularly in our efforts to protect those who are at-risk or most vulnerable to contracting a vaccine-preventable disease. Therefore, we also urge all levels of government to collaborate with community stakeholders in addressing misinformation about vaccine safety and improving vaccine education across the lifespan.

Thank you again for introducing the VACCINES Act and raising the importance of addressing the ongoing outbreaks of vaccine-preventable disease. We look forward to working with you and your colleagues to address this problem. For more information or if you have any questions, please contact NACCHO's Chief of Government and Public Affairs Adriane Casalotti, MPH, MSW at acasalotti@naccho.org.

Sincerely,



Lori Tremmel Freeman, MBA
CEO

ⁱ See Congressional Research Service's "Measles Outbreaks, Vaccine Hesitancy and Federal Policy Options", updated June 3, 2019

ⁱⁱ See CDC's "Widespread outbreak of hepatitis A across the United States". <https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/outbreaks/2017March-HepatitisA.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ See CDC's "Estimated Influenza Illnesses, Medical visits, Hospitalizations, and Deaths in the United States – 2017-2018 influenza season".

<https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/burden/2017-2018.htm>

^{iv} See "Local Health Department Immunization Programs: Findings from a 2017 NACCHO Assessment".

<http://essentialelements.naccho.org/archives/10940>

^v See CDC's "Vaccination Coverage Among Children Aged 19-35 Months—United States, 2017".

<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/wr/mm6740a4.htm>

^{vi} See NACCHO's 2018 Forces of Change Report available at <http://nachoprofilestudy.org/forces-of-change/>