

NACCHO

National Association of County & City Health Officials

The National Connection for Local Public Health

December 3, 2019

The Honorable Diana DeGette
Chair
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Brett Guthrie
Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman DeGette and Representative Guthrie,

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) represents the nation's nearly 3,000 local health departments across the country, who are responsible for safeguarding the health of all Americans. As part of your ongoing efforts to address seasonal and pandemic influenza, I wanted to make you aware of the critical role of local health departments in preventing and responding to outbreaks.

The 2018-19 flu season was the longest in a decade, lasting 21 consecutive weeks.ⁱ While vaccination rates for the 2018-2019 flu season rose 4.7% among children and 8.2% among adults compared to the prior season,ⁱⁱ much of the burden of illness could have been prevented through vaccination.

Local health departments are key participants in our nation's immunization infrastructure and are on the front lines responding to emerging health threats, including vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks. According to NACCHO's 2016 *National Profile of Local Health Departments*, nearly all local health departments provide clinical immunization services (90% of departments provide adult immunization services, while 88% provide childhood immunizations).ⁱⁱⁱ Beyond service delivery, local health departments also promote the importance of immunizations through education and policy. They monitor, prevent, and control disease to reduce the health risks and financial burden of infectious disease cases and outbreaks. Local health departments also assess their communities to identify pockets of lower vaccine coverage rates due to factors such as race and ethnicity, income, and location to ensure that underserved populations are covered against vaccine-preventable diseases. This is critical work to reduce suffering of individuals and costs to the health care system as a whole.

While many of us are familiar with the impact of seasonal flu, local health departments are also key partners in preparing for, and responding to, any outbreak of pandemic influenza, a global outbreak of a new influenza A virus. At the local level, health departments are actively taking steps to improve mass vaccination preparedness in advance of a pandemic. For example, emergency planners and health departments are using the CDC's Pandemic Vaccine Campaign Planning Tool (PanVax Tool) to estimate pandemic influenza vaccination administration capacity, strengthen their pandemic influenza vaccine campaign planning for the general public, and improve their pandemic vaccination programs through partnerships with community vaccine providers. Local health departments also engage with area medical providers, law enforcement, pharmacies, and other stakeholders to create community partnerships and establish relationships in advance of an outbreak or epidemic to plan for and streamline any future response.

The pandemic influenza preparedness efforts of local health departments do not come without challenges. Local health departments documented delays in vaccine availability hindering the scale of rapid mass vaccination during the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic.^{iv} At the same time, state and local jurisdictions experienced



challenges in reaching and vaccinating vulnerable populations. Moreover, in the decade since the H1N1 influenza pandemic, local health departments have lost almost a quarter of their workforce due to budget cuts. This means that there are fewer trained staff in place to shift their responsibilities to respond if and when a pandemic strikes.

As several states and counties across the nation are already seeing an uptick in influenza cases, it is also important to continue to promote vaccine confidence. Vaccines are one of the most successful public health measures available to populations worldwide, with an unparalleled record of disease reduction and prevention. Vaccines are a cost-effective tool for protecting children and adults against serious and potentially fatal diseases. Vaccines have been proven to be safe and highly effective at reducing disease rates when public health recommendations are followed.^v Vaccines across the lifespan are critical, particularly in efforts to protect those who are at-risk or most vulnerable to contracting a vaccine-preventable disease like influenza. Confidence in and access to vaccines is critical for both seasonal and pandemic influenza.

Strong partnerships among government agencies, health departments, healthcare systems, and community organizations are critical to addressing these challenges, but federal support cannot be understated. We need the resources to fully support our nation's health department workforce as a whole, as well as our vaccination assets and preparedness infrastructure, to be ready for both seasonal flu and a future pandemic.

Thank you for your continued interest in this issue. Please contact Adriane Casalotti, MPH, MSW, NACCHO Chief of Government and Public Affairs at acasalotti@naccho.org if you require additional information or have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lori Tremmel Freeman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Lori Tremmel Freeman, MBA
Chief Executive Officer

ⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). Update: Influenza Activity in the United States During the 2018–19 Season and Composition of the 2019–20 Influenza Vaccine. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)*. Retrieved December 2, 2019, from https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/68/wr/mm6824a3.htm?s_cid=mm6824a3_w.

ⁱⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). 2017-2018 Estimated Influenza Illnesses, Medical visits, Hospitalizations, and Deaths and Estimated Influenza Illnesses, Medical visits, Hospitalizations, and Deaths Averted by Vaccination in the United States. Retrieved December 2, 2019 from <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/fluview/coverage-1617estimates.htm>.

ⁱⁱⁱ NACCHO. "National Profile of Local Health Departments." Retrieved December 2, 2019 from <http://nacchoprofilestudy.org/>

^{iv} Rambhia KJ, Watson M, Sell TK, Waldhorn R, Toner E. Mass Vaccination for the 2009 H1N1 Pandemic: Approaches, Challenges, and Recommendations. *Biosecurity Bioterrorism Biodefense Strategy Pract Sci*. 2010;8(4):321-330. doi:10.1089/bsp.2010.0043

^v Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). Influenza Flu Vaccine Safety. Retrieved December 2, 2019 from <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/vaccines/flu-vaccine.html>.