

April X, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
1236 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
2468 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
322 Hart House Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Minority Leader McCarthy, Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer,

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, we would like to share our support for including the *Vaccine Awareness Campaign to Champion Immunization Nationally and Enhance Safety (VACCINES) Act of 2019*, (H.R. 2862), in the next legislative vehicle to respond to the coronavirus crisis.

We are extremely grateful that Congress has enacted several measures to aid the nation in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, one area that we feel must still be addressed is the need for robust uptake of a COVID-19 vaccine once available and ready for the general public. One potential barrier to that uptake is hesitancy of people to get the vaccine because of misinformation or disinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine or vaccines in general.

Vaccine hesitancy has been on the rise recently in the United States and increases in measles cases has been a direct result. From January 1 to December 31, 2019, there were 1,282 individual cases of measles confirmed in 31 states across the United States. This was the highest number of confirmed cases reported nationally since 1992, despite measles being declared eliminated in the United States in 2000. More than 73% of the cases last year were linked to outbreaks in New York, and the majority were found in people who were not vaccinated against measles. Infectious diseases like measles are more likely to spread and cause outbreaks in communities where people are unvaccinated.

The rise in the number of unvaccinated children and adults around the country is largely due to a surge in the spread of vaccine misinformation and vaccine hesitancy, which the World Health Organization (WHO) deemed one of the ten biggest threats to global health in 2019. The *VACCINES Act* is a critical step in combatting vaccine hesitancy and misinformation and ensuring that there is continued public awareness of the importance of vaccinations.

Unfortunately, despite the seriousness of the spread of COVID-19, there is a large amount of misinformation being spread about the coronavirus and an eventual vaccine for it. Groups that

oppose vaccination requirements have bombarded social media with posts that downplay the risks of COVID-19, promote discredited conspiracy theories about the virus, and criticize efforts to control the spread of the virus.

As medical, public health, patient and education organizations, we strongly supported the goals of the *VACCINES Act* prior to the current coronavirus outbreak—and the current pandemic makes this bill especially crucial. This legislation seeks to support research to better understand vaccine hesitancy, spread public awareness of the importance of vaccinations, and increase vaccination rates across the lifespan. Due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus, this legislation is needed now more than ever to help ensure fewer Americans are receptive to misinformation about the virus and any potential vaccine.

The bill authorizes the development of a national vaccination rate surveillance system at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and allows data collected to be used to identify communities with low vaccination utilization or where vaccine misinformation may be targeted. It also authorizes research grants to better understand vaccine hesitancy, attitudes towards vaccines, and develop strategies to address nonadherence to the recommended use of vaccines.

Additionally, the bill authorizes an evidence-based public awareness campaign on the importance of vaccinations that would aim to increase vaccination rates and can be targeted at communities that have particularly low vaccination levels. This public awareness campaign could be particularly useful to encourage people to get a COVID-19 vaccine once it becomes available. Grants authorized in the legislation may be awarded to State, local, and tribal health departments to engage communities with lower than average vaccination rates, better understand challenges to increasing vaccination rates in these communities and develop community partnerships to deliver evidence-based interventions to raise vaccination rates. In order to successfully prevent future outbreaks, these grants must be robustly funded to effectively engage communities with lower vaccination rates.

We appreciate your previous response to the COVID-19 crisis. Because of your commitment to ensuring high vaccination rates, we respectfully urge you to include the *VACCINES Act* as part of the next legislative response to the coronavirus outbreak. We look forward to working with you to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus, improve the vaccination rate across the lifespan, and prevent future outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases.

Sincerely,