

May 12, 2020

The Honorable Alex Azar
U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

On behalf of organizations dedicated to promoting public health and protecting children from vaccine-preventable illness, we write to ask for your assistance in reversing the serious recent downward trends in childhood vaccination rates. Our organizations believe that resources are urgently needed for efforts to ensure that as stay-at-home orders across the country are lifted, families understand the importance of safely returning their children to their primary care medical homes for immunizations and well-child care.

Amid the COVID-19 epidemic, providers of care to children have seen significant reductions in patient volume and attendant declines in immunization. This is confirmed by data published in the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) on May 8 that shows substantial recent declines in childhood vaccine ordering and administration.¹ These data raise important concerns about the development of a secondary outbreak of infectious disease. In addition, children are missing important well-child care that includes vital services such as the provision of anticipatory guidance and mental health screening.

Primary care providers have adjusted to the current situation by making their practices especially safe places for children to receive medical care. The American Academy of Pediatrics has published guidance on providing well-care to children during COVID-19.² Strategies implemented in primary care medical homes include scheduling well visits and sick visits at different times of the day, spatially separating sick and well patients, and collaborating with other community primary care providers. Practices have also implemented telehealth visits that can be followed up with timely in-person visits.

As the MMWR notes, parental concerns about the safety of contact with the health care system may be a significant contributor to these declines. Efforts are urgently needed to ensure that parents know that vaccination and well-child care is safe and essential. There is a critical role for state and local medical and public health entities to play in restoring family confidence in the primary care medical home. We urge you to provide resources for communications efforts to reach parents with these important messages.

In addition, investment in our primary care infrastructure will be especially crucial as children return for catch-up immunizations, the fall influenza vaccination seasons arrives, and a potential vaccine to prevent COVID-19 becomes available. Addressing low provider payment for vaccine administration and incentivizing continued participation in the Vaccines for Children Program are also crucially needed.

We thank you for your urgent attention to the need to support our existing vaccine delivery system for children and ensure that children are receiving safe and timely immunizations and well-care in their primary care medical homes.

Sincerely,

American Academy of Family Physicians
American Academy of Pediatrics
Association of Immunization Managers
Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs
Association of State and Territorial Health Officials
National Association of County and City Health Officials

¹ Santoli et al. "Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Routine Pediatric Vaccine Ordering and Administration — United States, 2020." MMRW. May 8, 2020. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/pdfs/mm6919e2-H.pdf>.

² American Academy of Pediatrics. "Guidance on Providing Pediatric Well-Care During COVID-19." Available at <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/guidance-on-providing-pediatric-well-care-during-covid-19/>.