

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 1, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Azar,

We urge the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to issue a comprehensive, national vaccines strategy that goes far beyond the scope of the recently released COVID-19 vaccine distribution strategy. In addition to significantly expanding the scope of the strategy to address research, development, manufacturing, and much more, we urge you to update vaccine distribution guidance to include a robust and detailed strategy to inform, collaborate, and engage with communities of color to equitably distribute a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine to these communities once it is licensed or authorized for use.

As of September 30, 2020, COVID-19 has caused the deaths of over 200,000 Americans. More than seven million people in the U.S. have tested positive for the virus, and thousands of individuals are currently hospitalized with severe symptoms. The coronavirus has devastated communities across the country. However, the virus has not affected every community the same.

Communities of color—particularly Black, Latinx, and Indigenous populations—have been disproportionately impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. In fact, Latinx, Black, and Asian patients are more than twice as likely to test positive for COVID-19 as white patients¹. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released data that found more than 75 percent of coronavirus deaths among people under the age of 21 have been Black, Latinx and Indigenous youth². Overall, Black and Latinx individuals are more than three times as likely to die from COVID-19 when age is taken into account.

On September 16, the CDC released *COVID-19 Vaccination Program Interim Playbook for Jurisdiction Operations*, a long-overdue document to guide state, territorial, and local public health programs on how to plan for the distribution of a future COVID-19 vaccine or vaccines. However, the guidance woefully lacks focused attention on addressing racial disparities during the coronavirus pandemic.

In the 57-page document, communities of color are mentioned in only three sentences. If we are to effectively confront existing racial disparities, our policies and guidelines must explicitly identify the ways we plan to do so. For too long, officials have touted addressing racial disparities as a priority, only to forget or ignore communities of color during the implementation and execution of government plans, or to mention them as an afterthought.

¹ <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/covid-19-racial-disparities-testing-infection-hospitalization-death-analysis-epic-patient-data/>

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/09/15/covid-deaths-hispanic-black-children/>

The alarming disparities in rates of COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, and deaths are not coincidental. The divergent outcomes are directly linked to existing inequities and discriminatory federal, state, and local policies. Overrepresentation in frontline, essential jobs in which social distancing is more difficult, a disproportionate prevalence of preexisting health conditions, policies that lead to overcrowded and segregated housing, and reliance on public transportation, have placed communities of color at greater risk of COVID-19.

We urge you to thoughtfully engage with communities of color to swiftly produce and publicly release supplemental guidance to the September 16 national vaccine distribution document that illustrates the agency's efforts to address racial disparities during the distribution and monitoring of a safe, effective COVID-19 vaccine. The CDC must explicitly involve Black, Latinx, and Indigenous populations—as well as other communities of color—in the formation of robust public plans to distribute a COVID-19 vaccine. In addition, we request further details on how the Trump administration intends to build trust, combat misinformation, and promote vaccinations within communities of color.

Communities of color in the United States deserve more than three sentences in your document. They deserve an equitable vaccine distribution plan that sufficiently responds to the unique health disparities within—and authentically builds trust with—their communities.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

/s/ Jeffrey A. Merkley
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

/s/ Michael F. Bennet
Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator

/s/ Richard Blumenthal
Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

/s/ Debbie Stabenow
Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator

/s/ Cory A. Booker
Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

/s/ Tammy Baldwin
Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

/s/ Patty Murray
Patty Murray
United States Senator

/s/ Elizabeth Warren
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

/s/ Tina Smith
Tina Smith
United States Senator

/s/ Jack Reed
Jack Reed
United States Senator

/s/ Gary C. Peters
Gary C. Peters
United States Senator

/s/ Kirsten Gillibrand
Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

/s/ Edward J. Markey
Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

/s/ Thomas R. Carper
Thomas R. Carper
United States Senator

/s/ Sherrod Brown
Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

/s/ Ron Wyden
Ron Wyden
United States Senator

/s/ Mazie K. Hirono
Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator

/s/ Bernard Sanders
Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

/s/ Chris Van Hollen
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

/s/ Amy Klobuchar
Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator