

**Testimony for the House Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on
Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies**

Concerning Fiscal Year 2020 Appropriations for NIH, CDC, and AHRQ

Submitted for the Record

April 5, 2019

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We are writing to you as a group of scientists, physicians, educators, public health officials as well as specialists in public health law and health communication who believe that the current precarious situation with regard to declines in childhood vaccination coverage in the United States requires appropriate intervention at the Federal level. We thank you for this opportunity to share our views on Fiscal Year 2020 (FY20) appropriations under the jurisdiction of the Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies.

As infectious diseases do not respect state boundaries and measles alone have been reported in 21 states over the last 15 months, childhood vaccinations are clearly a national problem requiring federal leadership. We urge the inclusion of dedicated funding (a minimum of \$25 million) for a national vaccine advocacy campaign and grants to state and local public health agencies to provide information for mothers and families on the importance of vaccination to prevent serious and costly childhood diseases. We also encourage support for the development of Guiding Principles for social media and other private sector entities to encourage them to give precedence for evidence-based vaccine information and adopt ethical standards that will advance the health security for all Americans.

At present, vaccine hesitancy is considered by the World Health Organization to be a top ten global health problem. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ranked vaccinations as one of the ten great achievements of the 20th century. Yet, this year in the United States, drops in the coverage of vaccinated children has led to a worrying increase in outbreaks of measles and other childhood infectious diseases once thought to be eliminated in our country. We believe that if the government can act now to stem these outbreaks and restore vaccination rates to necessary levels for protecting communities throughout America, we can assure that our children will be spared from serious illnesses, while we also avoid adding unnecessary costs to our already overburdened healthcare system.

A recent article (March 7th) in the *Washington Post* entitled: "States are failing on vaccinations The federal government must lead" that a number of us authored, outlined these challenges and outlined potential solutions (<https://wapo.st/2YuJ5sP>). A forthcoming article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* expands further on these points, supported by evidence-based scientific, legal and communication approaches for action.

Within the FY 20 federal appropriations now under your consideration, we recommend that you address this issue meaningfully with funding a well-designed national campaign to restore vaccination confidence, particularly among parents who must make the ultimate decision to immunize their children. We know from a recent national survey by Emerson Polling, that the vast majority of Americans (more than 85%) continue to support the need for childhood vaccination. This public support needs to be reinforced with a campaign and consideration of the

other policy levers that support complementary approaches to educate and persuade vaccine hesitant parents at the state and local level.

The funding we recommend would enable the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to develop, test, implement and evaluate the effectiveness of a new communication campaign with a name such as “Safe Vaccinations for a Healthy America”. This campaign would send a clear signal of commitment to help parents and families understand the vital importance of protecting their children with vaccination. Additional consideration of state grants or contracts to provide resources and technical assistance on effective health literacy strategies with cultural competencies for multiple populations could also be included. The campaign also should encourage social network organizations along with private and publicly-traded companies to screen out false anti-vaccine messages that promote childhood disease, just as they do for sexually explicit, violent, or threatening messages. Furthermore, social media companies could go further, exercising corporate responsibility by disseminating science-based health information proactively as “public service announcements” to advance societal well-being and vaccine literacy.

We also believe that any initiative that you could help launch would trigger additional multi-sectoral engagement and financial support in what could become an iconic, enduring public awareness effort, a 21st century equivalent of "Smokey the Bear" that uses science-based, tested messages about vaccination to resonate Smokey's prescient warning that "Only YOU can prevent..." in a context that is highly relevant today.

We would be pleased to provide additional oral testimony in support of this request. We thank you for considering the immediacy of this need.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

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