

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 26, 2020

VIA ELECTRONIC DELIVERY

Dr. Rochelle Walensky
Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30329

Dear Director Walensky:

I write with regards to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s recent guidance on mask wearing for fully vaccinated individuals. While I commend the CDC's transparent and science-based approach to the Nation's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, I am concerned that parents, caregivers and immunocompromised patients across the country may now have to navigate a confusing patchwork of recommendations and requirements in order to keep themselves and their families safe. With respect to the public health of children in particular, I urge the CDC to issue clear, affirmative guidance around mask wearing in schools, child care, camps and during sports participation.

On May 13, 2021, the CDC released new guidance, stating that people who are fully vaccinated can "resume activities without wearing a mask or physically distancing, except where required by Federal, State, local, tribal or territorial laws, rules and regulations, including local business and workplace guidance." This could be welcome news for the more than 130 million Americans who have been fully vaccinated with one of the three vaccines authorized for emergency use (EUA) by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), including the vaccines manufactured by Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson. The available scientific and public health data indicate that all three COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective, meaning that fully vaccinated people are unlikely to become seriously ill or die from COVID-19, as well as to transmit the SARS-CoV-2 virus to others.

Despite the good news about these vaccines, many Americans who may want to get vaccinated have not done so yet, and the virus continues to spread. To date, children under 12 are not eligible to receive any COVID-19 vaccine, and adolescents ages 12 to 15 have only recently become eligible for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. Though young people are not as likely as seniors or people with certain pre-existing conditions to become severely ill or die from COVID-19, their health is still at risk. Children now account for over 20 percent of COVID-19 cases in the United States, and several hundred have died. That risk can be mitigated by ubiquitous mask wearing.

Many individuals face a myriad of obstacles, including inequitable access, to getting vaccinated. For example, in a recent survey, one-third of unvaccinated Hispanic participants said they would like to get vaccinated, compared to 17 percent of Black respondents and 16 percent of white respondents. Of the reasons given for why they have not yet received the vaccine, respondents

expressed worry about missing work, paying for the vaccine (even though it is free) or having to provide government-issued identification or a Social Security number. In addition to access issues, vaccine hesitancy continues to challenge vaccine uptake rates.

Further, the full extent of the protection provided by any of the authorized vaccines for people who are immunocompromised, such as people who take immunosuppressive medications or who have certain medical conditions, remains unknown. They and the people who have not yet been vaccinated will continue to rely on mitigation measures, such as mask wearing and social distancing, as well as herd immunity—which has not yet been achieved in the United States—in order to be protected from COVID-19. The CDC has acknowledged this, saying that people who are not fully vaccinated should continue to wear masks and reiterated its guidance for universal mask wearing in schools for the remainder of the school year. Simultaneously, some states, including Texas, have banned mask mandates in public schools.

Even though the scientific data indicate that fully vaccinated people do not need to wear masks in most settings, there is currently no practical way for individuals to tell who is vaccinated and who is not, and many businesses, event venues and employers are choosing to use the “honor system.” The new guidance has therefore led to uncertainty for parents and caregivers with young kids, and for those who are immunocompromised or not yet vaccinated, as they navigate decisions, such as whether it is safe to go to the grocery store or bank.

The American people rely on the CDC to provide clear, easy-to-understand public health advice, guidance and messaging. As such, it is important that the agency continue to engage with relevant stakeholders, such as State and local governments, health departments, patients and healthcare and public health professionals, who work on the ground with affected groups. I therefore respectfully request that the agency provide such guidance for State and local governments planning re-opening procedures, and for the general public. In particular, parents, caregivers and immunocompromised patients would benefit from the clarified guidance, which will help them assess the risk to themselves and the people around them, including children who are too young to wear masks, children who are ineligible for the vaccine or children who are not yet fully vaccinated. Thank you for your efforts, your continued work in helping the Nation address the COVID-19 pandemic and your timely attention to this request.

Sincerely,



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator