

A letter from US Chairs of Departments of Pediatrics on the priorities of the next Secretary of HHS

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Dear Senator:

As leaders in pediatric medicine, our commitment to the health and well-being of every child in America drives us to speak out, in our personal capacities, on the qualifications necessary for the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS). The Secretary of HHS plays a crucial role in shaping policies that impact the health of our nation, and it is essential for this leader to embrace science-based leadership, particularly in areas like vaccination, health care coverage, and mental health.

As a powerful reminder of the critical connection between promoting the health of children and our nation's prosperity, a 2020 Department of Defense study performed before the COVID-19 pandemic found that 77% of American youth between the ages of 17 and 24 years nationwide were ineligible for military service for health reasons. Notably, in 2023, three branches of the military (Army, Navy and Air Force) failed to meet recruiting goals for the first time ever, underscoring that all Americans are at risk if the trajectories in children's health are left unaddressed.

With this background, we see the following issues that impact children's health as the most pressing for the next Secretary of Health and Human Services:

Promotion of access to safe, effective vaccines: Vaccines have been one of the most significant public health achievements of the modern era, saving millions of lives and preventing countless cases of disease and suffering. Before widespread vaccination, diseases like measles, polio, and whooping cough claimed thousands of lives annually, particularly among children. Since the introduction of vaccines, these numbers have plummeted. For example, in the US, the measles vaccine alone has led to a 99% reduction in cases, and globally, vaccines prevent 4-5 million deaths each year. The Secretary of HHS must be a staunch defender of vaccination programs and their widespread uptake, recognizing their proven safety and efficacy, and must support the development of new vaccines as a strategy to prevent serious disease.

Promoting children's access to high quality health care: During the COVID-19 pandemic, the value of Medicaid became more apparent than ever, as millions of families turned to this program for vital healthcare coverage. Between February 2020 and February 2021, Medicaid enrollment grew by 9.7 million people—a 13.9% increase—as families faced unprecedented health and economic challenges. Today, half of America's children are covered by Medicaid, a lifeline that provides access to critical services. The next Secretary of HHS must support and champion Medicaid expansion, ensuring that all children, especially those from low-income families, have access to essential healthcare and mental healthcare.

Addressing the mental crisis in children: Mental health is another critical area of focus that has been exacerbated since the pandemic. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, 1 in 6 U.S. youth aged 6-17 years experience a mental health disorder each year; yet nearly half do not receive necessary treatment. Leadership at HHS must support comprehensive mental health services for children, integrating mental health into primary care settings to reduce stigma and improve access and affordability.

Countering health misinformation: At a time when the proliferation of misinformation poses a significant threat to public health, the importance of trust in science and medical professionals cannot be overstated. As pediatricians, we are on the front lines, advocating for vaccinations and providing compassionate, evidence-based care because we see firsthand the benefits of these interventions. As misinformation about vaccines and other health measures continues to spread, fueling fear, skepticism, and hesitancy, the expertise and guidance of pediatricians are increasingly undermined, potentially leading to serious health consequences for children. The HHS Secretary must be a vocal advocate for science, standing in lockstep with the medical community to combat misinformation and restore public faith and confidence in our healthcare system.

In conclusion, the health and security of our nation depends on strong, science-based leadership promoting the health of children at the helm of our federal government. The next HHS Secretary must be a champion for vaccines, children's health care coverage and mental health, and the fight against misinformation, working tirelessly to protect the health and well-being of every child in America. Together, we can solidify the health and future of the nation through child-centric interventions and health policies that will improve lives for generations to come.

Sincerely,

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