

January 28, 2020

The Honorable Alex M. Azar, II
Secretary U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Hubert H. Humphrey Building, Room 509F
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

The Honorable Chad Wolf
Acting U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security
245 Murray Lane, SW
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretary Azar and Acting Secretary Wolf:

As organizations representing physicians and other clinicians, health care professionals and public health officials, we are writing to strongly reiterate requests for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to implement an influenza vaccination program for asylum-seekers and migrants who are in the custody of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency. In the absence of effective vaccination programs, influenza can be a highly contagious viral infection of the respiratory passages causing fever and often occurring in epidemics. We are deeply concerned that the most severe outcomes of flu infection, resulting in hospitalization or death, have yet to be mitigated by CBP.

On May 20, 2019, CBP released a statement that 16-year-old migrant Carlos Gregorio Hernandez Vasquez was diagnosed with influenza and died in his holding cell without receiving appropriate care.¹ Eight months later, as we are in the middle of the flu season, little progress has been made in addressing the spread of infectious diseases in detention facilities. Repeated calls to the Trump Administration from Congress, advocacy organizations and public health experts to provide flu vaccinations and treatment for migrant detainees have not resulted in the necessary action.² Carlos was not the first migrant child to die in Homeland Security's custody, and if action is not taken immediately, others may be needlessly exposed to similar risks.

Young children are particularly vulnerable to influenza with potential complications that can include pneumonia, dehydration, and in some cases, death. Three children have died in detention centers in part as a result of influenza since December 2018. Children, older adults, pregnant women and persons with certain chronic medical conditions face a significant health risk without appropriate prevention protocols for influenza. Congested living conditions facing children and families detained in CBP custody can further aggravate the spread of infectious diseases.

The 2019-2020 flu season could be one of the worst in decades. The CDC estimates that there have been 6.4 million flu-related illnesses and 2,900 deaths, including 27 pediatric deaths.³ Flu activity is elevated

¹ CBP Press Release, May 20, 2019, (<https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/speeches-and-statements/cbp-statement-death-custody-16-year-old-guatemalan-passes-away-rgv>).

² New York Times, *House Democrats Demand Answers as Migrant Deaths Continue to Rise*, December 23, 2019, (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/23/us/politics/migrants-death-border.html>).

³ CDC Flue Activity & Surveillance, January 18, 2020, (<https://www.cdc.gov/flu/weekly/#S2>).

across the U.S. and is at the highest evaluation level in many of the border states. HHS officials have emphasized the importance of getting vaccinated to protect against the flu.

However, CBP has refused to put a vaccination program into effect. Their decision is based on the perceived complexity of establishing a program to people in federal detention and citing the length of stay in border facilities as a limiting factor. Indisputably, withholding vaccinations against influenza from migrants is a violation of the most basic principles of public health and human rights. We urge DHS to meet basic standards for screening, isolation, treatment, and preventions, including influenza vaccination programs, to limit the spread of infectious diseases. If you have any questions, please contact José A. Rodriguez, Senior Policy & Advocacy Manager for HIVMA, at JRodriguez@hivma.org, or by calling 703-299-1215.

Sincerely the 18 undersigned interested organizations:

American Academy of HIV Medicine
American College of Physicians
Association of Nurses in AIDS Care
American Public Health Association
Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology
Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs
Big Cities Health Coalition
Families Fighting Flu
HIV Medicine Association
Immunization Action Coalition
Infectious Diseases Society of America
National Association of County and City Health Officials
National Alliance of State & Territorial AIDS Directors
National Consumers League
Pediatric Infectious Diseases Society
Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America
STC Health
The Gerontological Society of America