

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 29, 2026

The Honorable Erica Schwartz, MD, MPH, JD
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road NE
Atlanta, GA 30329

The Honorable Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Director Schwartz and Secretary Kennedy,

We call for answers on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) month-long delay in making COVID-19 vaccines available through the Vaccines for Children (VFC) program. As of Wednesday evening, CDC notified states and local partners that the ordering portal is open—nearly a month after the FDA approved this season's vaccines, during which the CDC offered no explanation for the delay.¹ Concerningly, this delay follows a pattern of decisions by this Administration to undermine Americans' faith in and access to vaccines. We demand an immediate public accounting of this delay, confirmation that the distribution will proceed without further interruption, and full explanation of what caused millions of low-income and uninsured children to wait for vaccines, heading into the fall respiratory illness season.

The VFC program is a cornerstone of our country's public health system. Established by Congress in 1993 in the wake of a measles epidemic that struck hardest among children without access to routine care, the program provides recommended vaccines to children who are uninsured, underinsured, are eligible for Medicaid, or are American Indian or Alaska Native.² Today, the VFC program ensures that roughly half of all children in the United States receive recommended immunizations, distributing approximately 70 million pediatric vaccine doses in 2025 alone.³ By the CDC's own description, the VFC program is “one of the nation's most

¹ Lena H. Sun & Rachel Roubein, *States Can Now Access COVID Vaccines for Low-Income Children, After Delay*, Wash. Post (Sept 23, 2026), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2026/09/23/states-can-soon-order-covid-vaccines-low-income-children-after-delay/>.

² U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *About the Vaccines for Children (VFC) Program* (Aug. 27, 2026), <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines-for-children/about/index.html>; U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Vaccines for Children (VFC) Program: Information for Parents* (Aug. 27, 2026), <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines-for-children/vfc-information-for-parents/index.html>.

important contributors to vaccine access.”⁴ Delays to the VFC program’s vaccine distribution place children and families at risk of serious, preventable diseases.

CDC’s delay has left millions of children who rely on the VFC program waiting weeks for vaccines already available to families with commercial insurance. On August 27, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved updated COVID-19 vaccines for the 2026-2027 season, and the vaccines are available at retail pharmacies for many Americans covered by commercial insurance.⁵ In a typical year, states are able to place orders for vaccines within two weeks of doses becoming commercially available.⁶ For the second season in a row, that did not happen.⁷ This year, the CDC did not open ordering for nearly four weeks after the FDA’s approval, leaving half of American children who rely on VFC waiting for a vaccine that wealthier, commercially insured families could already access.

Throughout that month, HHS offered only vague assurances that CDC is “finalizing decisions” and that COVID-19 does not follow the same seasonal pattern as flu and other respiratory viruses.⁸ Neither explanation accounts for the delay. And neither HHS nor CDC has provided an explanation for what remained undecided for four weeks after FDA approval.

Moreover, the delays appear to be the latest in a pattern of eroding vaccine access under this Administration. In May 2025, Secretary Kennedy announced that the CDC would no longer recommend the COVID vaccine for healthy children.⁹ In August 2026, President Trump signed an executive order directing the splitting of the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine into separate shots without scientific justification.¹⁰ Secretary Kennedy has also continued to champion unfounded vaccine skepticism in public forums, including delivering the keynote

³ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Vaccines for Children Program – Operations Guide* (July 1, 2026), <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines-for-children/media/pdfs/2026/07/vfc-ops-guide-508.pdf>.

⁴ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *About the Vaccines for Children (VFC) Program* (Aug. 27, 2026), <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines-for-children/about/index.html>.

⁵ Terence Rudd, *FDA Approves Four Updated COVID Shots Targeting XFG Variant*, MedPage Today (Aug. 28, 2026), <https://www.medpagetoday.com/infectiousdisease/covid19vaccine/122809>; Maggie Astor, *New Covid Vaccines Are Available. Here’s How to Get One*, N.Y. Times (Aug. 27, 2026), <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/08/27/well/live/covid-vaccines-fall-2026.html>.

⁶ Jennifer Calfas & Lizzy Lawrence, *States Delayed in Getting Covid Shots for Children’s Immunization Program*, Wall St. J. (Sept. 16, 2026), <https://www.wsj.com/health/healthcare/states-delayed-in-getting-covid-shots-for-childrens-immunization-program-6b3fa392>.

⁷ Melissa Jenco, *COVID Vaccines for Children in Federal Program Delayed*, AAP News (Sept. 18, 2026), <https://publications.aap.org/aapnews/news/36144/COVID-vaccines-for-children-in-federal-program>.

⁸ Jennifer Calfas & Lizzy Lawrence, *States Delayed in Getting Covid Shots for Children’s Immunization Program*, Wall St. J. (Sept. 16, 2026), <https://www.wsj.com/health/healthcare/states-delayed-in-getting-covid-shots-for-childrens-immunization-program-6b3fa392>.

⁹ Jason L. Schwartz, *Revised Recommendations for Covid-19 Vaccines — U.S. Vaccination Policy under Threat*, New England Journal of Medicine (June 18, 2026), <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp2507766>.

¹⁰ Michelle Stoddart & Emily Chang, *Doctors push back on Trump executive order to change childhood vaccine schedule*, ABC News (Aug. 10, 2026), <https://abcnews.com/Politics/trump-executive-order-childhood-vaccine-schedule/story?id=135524851>.

address this month at a conference hosted by Children’s Health Defense, the anti-vaccine organization he helped found and previously led.¹¹ Given this record, we are gravely concerned that this delay reflects the same hostility to vaccinations—whether through deliberate obstruction or negligence—rather than an administrative hiccup.

The month-long delay also occurred just as the CDC’s own data show rising COVID-19 infections in 27 states; as measles outbreaks spread across multiple states, including four deaths in Pennsylvania in August; and as childhood vaccination rates have fallen nationally, with many pinning responsibility on the turmoil and confusion sown by federal health officials like Secretary Kennedy.¹² Every week the VFC program delayed distributing COVID-19 vaccines was a week in which low-income and uninsured families were denied a protection easily available to commercially insured families. That is a two-tiered public health system, created by policy choices at the top of this Administration—not an accident of timing.

Director Schwartz, at your confirmation hearing in July, you pledged that your first priority would be “restoring trust in public health institutions through radical transparency.”¹³ Delaying vaccine access without explanation, leaving Congress and the American people to learn of it through anonymous sources, is the opposite of that pledge. Accordingly, we request written responses to the following questions, no later than Friday, October 9, 2026:

1. Why did CDC take nearly four weeks after FDA approval to open ordering? Please provide a timeline comparing this year’s procurement and ordering schedule to the previous three years.
2. Has any political appointee at HHS or CDC—including the Secretary or his direct reports—delayed, paused, or otherwise intervened in the vaccine procurement or ordering process for the VFC program? If so, identify who and describe the nature of the intervention. Please provide any relevant internal communications.
3. How and when did CDC communicate this delay and its resolution to state health departments and immunization managers?

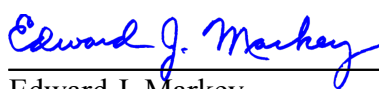
¹¹ Jen Christensen, *Kennedy tells anti-vaccine group he previously led that he’ll ‘stay in this fight’*, CNN (Sept. 17, 2026), <https://www.cnn.com/2026/09/17/health/kennedy-antivaccine-group-speech>.

¹² Caroline Kee, *Is There a Summer COVID Surge? With Cases Rising in Most States, Watch for These Symptoms*, TODAY (Sept. 22, 2026), <https://www.today.com/health/coronavirus/summer-covid-surge-symptoms-guidelines-2026-covid-vaccine-test-rcna592549>; U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Current Epidemic Trends*, (Sept. 18, 2026), <https://www.cdc.gov/cfa-modeling-and-forecasting/rt-estimates/index.html>; Mike Stobbe, *U.S. school vaccination rates inch down again as exemptions reach record high*, PBS (Aug. 17, 2026), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/u-s-school-vaccination-rates-inch-down-again-as-exemptions-reach-record-high>; Jennifer Calfas, *Fourth Measles-Related Death Reported in Pennsylvania*, Wall St. J. (Sept 15, 2026), <https://www.wsj.com/us-news/fourth-measles-related-death-reported-in-pennsylvania-2ab55b17>.

¹³ Pien Huang, *CDC director nominee Erica Schwartz faced questions in Senate hearing*, NPR (July 15, 2026), <https://www.npr.org/2026/07/15/nx-s1-5892482/cdc-director-erica-schwartz-senate-confirmation-hearing>.

Every child deserves protection from dangerous preventable diseases, regardless of insurance status or their family's income. Thus far, CDC has yet to offer the public any reasonable justification for a month-long delay in making vaccines accessible through the VFC program. Any delay in the program's operation, particularly one that coincides with this Administration's broader repudiation of vaccines, creates an unacceptable disparity that may lead to illness or even death. With children's health on the line, we will not accept silence as a substitute for accountability.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator
Ranking Member, Committee
on Health, Education, Labor,
and Pensions