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February 15, 2024

The Honorable Brad Wenstrup
Chair, Select Subcommittee on
the Coronavirus Pandemic
Committee on Oversight and Accountability
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Raul Ruiz
Ranking Member, Select Subcommittee on
the Coronavirus Pandemic
Committee on Oversight and Accountability
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Wenstrup and Ranking Member Ruiz:

The Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) is pleased to submit comments for the record in advance of the hearing titled, “Assessing America’s Vaccine Safety Systems, Part One.” ASTHO is the national nonprofit organization representing the public health agencies of the 50 states, five U.S. territories, three freely associated states, and Washington, D.C. ASTHO members, the chief health officials of these jurisdictions, are dedicated to formulating and influencing sound public health policy and to ensuring excellence in public health practice. Our comments below reflect these priorities and perspectives.

Our nation’s vaccine review process includes careful analysis by the Food and Drug Administration, the Vaccine and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), and recommendations from major medical associations’ guidelines. These processes are robust, have safety at their core, and use the most recent data to evaluate the risks and benefits of vaccinations, including ideal dosage, scheduling, and populations that would benefit most from vaccination.

A core function of state and territorial health departments is building trust with both the public and partners. To improve and monitor vaccine safety, ASTHO members support research and evaluation to improve safety and efficacy of existing vaccines and delivery techniques. Health departments—and all providers who administer vaccinations—distribute information on the risks and benefits of vaccines and the availability of compensation for vaccine-related injuries through the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program (VICP). This educational material is provided for individuals to review prior to vaccination and to take with them in case of any questions or concerns following vaccination.

Most people seek information on vaccines from people they trust, including their doctor and peer groups. Because the science confirming the vaccine’s safety and effectiveness is so clear, the vast majority of Americans have chosen to protect themselves and others against severe illness and death caused by COVID. But we also know millions remain hesitant or outright opposed to vaccination. Misinformation and disinformation abound, especially on social media.

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Vaccination has been the norm in America for decades. Indeed prior to the pandemic, most childhood vaccination rates were above 90%. Almost all members of the military complied with the range of vaccine requirements and most healthcare providers followed flu vaccine requirements because they know it makes both them and their patients safer. If we can turn down the temperature on vaccine debates, return to these traditional norms, and rely upon the robust scientific evidence, we can promote the health of all Americans by working together to improve overall vaccination rates. Informing the public truthfully about the safety and effectiveness of vaccines is critical. We therefore encourage the committee to engage this topic responsibly and with the utmost integrity.

In 2023, ACIP unanimously approved the immunization schedules for children, adolescents, and adults, which will now include COVID-19 vaccines. The schedules assist healthcare providers with specifics on how and when to administer vaccines. ACIP meets every year to review and make changes to the childhood and adult immunization schedule. The recommendations of ACIP are used to inform state and territorial policy decisions about vaccines. Ultimately, state and local jurisdictions decide which vaccines, including COVID-19, will be part of their school vaccination requirements.

Worldwide, more than 13 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines have been safely administered to people across both the lifespan and the spectrum of underlying health concerns. These efforts have saved countless lives. ASTHO continues to join with other public health and healthcare professionals across the nation to help people learn about vaccine safety and share how COVID-19 vaccines and other vaccines protect the public.

If you have any questions or require additional information please contact Carolyn Mullen, ASTHO's senior vice president of government affairs and public relations at cmullen@astho.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M Fraser', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Michael R. Fraser, PhD, MS, CAE, FCPP
Chief Executive Officer