

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 22, 2021

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary
United States Department of Health & Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Becerra:

As our Nation confronts worrying news about the omicron variant of COVID-19, a strain which appears to be even more transmissible than the highly contagious delta variant, we write seeking information about the Biden administration's efforts to protect nursing home residents and workers against another surge of this virus. Recent news reports have highlighted concerns about the pace of administering booster shots and additional primary vaccine doses to nursing home residents and workers.¹ Given the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) guidance that all adults receive these shots to better protect themselves against COVID-19,² we seek assurances that the Biden administration is doing everything in its power to provide nursing homes ready access to these safe and effective preventive measures.

In response to our requests dating back to early 2020, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has been collecting and publishing data that provide the public with transparent information about the effect of COVID-19 in nursing homes participating in Medicare and Medicaid, as well as the pace of vaccinating residents and workers.³ These data make clear that additional primary and booster doses are an important tool in protecting nursing home residents and workers from COVID-19 infections. Fully vaccinated nursing home residents (i.e. one dose of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine or two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines) have lower rates of COVID-19 infections than unvaccinated residents, while residents who receive additional primary or booster doses of a COVID-19 vaccine have significantly lower rates of infection.⁴

¹ Rachel Roubein, "Nursing homes are scrambling to get residents boosted," *Washington Post* (December 16, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/12/16/omicron-is-coming-long-term-care-residents/>; Nathaniel Weixel, "Nursing homes scramble to get residents boosted," *The Hill* (December 19, 2021), <https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/586379-nursing-homes-scramble-to-get-residents-boosted>.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "COVID-19 Vaccine Booster Shots: Everyone Ages 16 and Older Can Get a Booster Shot," December 9, 2021 https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/booster-shot.html?s_cid=11706:cdc%20covid%20booster:sem.ga:p:RG:GM:gen:PTN:FY22 (accessed December 22, 2021).

³ U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, "Casey, Wyden Applaud Administration for Publishing User-Friendly COVID-19 Vaccination Nursing Home Data," press release, September 22, 2021, <https://www.aging.senate.gov/press-releases/casey-wyden-applaud-administration-for-publishing-user-friendly-covid-19-vaccination-nursing-home-data>.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Unadjusted COVID-19 Cases Per 1,000 Nursing Home Residents, by COVID-19 Vaccination Status (Including Additional Primary and Booster Doses) and Week, United States," (National Healthcare Safety Network, December 2021), <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#vaccinations-nursing-homes> (accessed December 22, 2021).

We are concerned that just 55 percent of fully vaccinated nursing home residents nationally have received additional primary or booster doses of COVID-19 vaccines as of December 12, 2021. Worker uptake of additional primary and booster doses is even lower at 23 percent nationally.⁵ Of further concern, in some states, these figures are significantly lower.⁶ Racial disparities in vaccination rates also must continue to be addressed. Research has shown that people of color are more likely to live in nursing homes with low vaccination rates, while Black and Hispanic people in the general population make up a disproportionately small share of booster dose recipients.⁷

While work remains to be done, as 2021 comes to a close, it is important to note that our Nation has come a long way in its fight against COVID-19, particularly in nursing homes. This progress is a testament to HHS's efforts to prioritize vaccinating nursing home residents and workers, which was imperative given that COVID-19 deaths in these and other long-term care settings accounted for nearly a third of deaths during the pandemic's first year.⁸ To date, 87 percent of nursing home residents and 77 percent of nursing home workers across our Nation are vaccinated according to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.⁹

Moreover, as vaccination rates have increased, COVID-19 deaths have plummeted. During the weeks from Thanksgiving 2020 to the first week of January 2021, more than 5,600 nursing home residents were dying weekly from COVID-19, an annualized rate of nearly 300,000 deaths. By contrast, for the six weeks ending on December 5, 2021, the rate of COVID-19 deaths had fallen to an average of about 425 per week. We know the Biden administration shares our goals to expeditiously drive up vaccinations and booster shots, while substantially driving down infections and deaths.

Given the need for additional primary and booster doses of the COVID-19 vaccine among nursing home residents and workers, we are seeking information about the steps the Biden administration is taking to increase these rates. Therefore, please provide us the following information no later than January 19, 2022:

1. What are the Biden administration's goals and associated timelines for rates of primary and booster doses of the COVID-19 vaccine among nursing home residents and workers in 2022? What steps is the Biden administration taking to ensure that nursing home residents and workers have access to booster shots?

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "COVID Data Tracker: Nursing Home COVID-19 Vaccination Data Dashboard," <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#vaccinations-nursing-homes> (accessed December 22, 2021).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Nambi Ndugga, et al., "Latest Data on COVID-19 Vaccinations by Race/Ethnicity," *Kaiser Family Foundation* (December 15, 2021), <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/latest-data-on-covid-19-vaccinations-by-race-ethnicity/> (accessed December 22, 2021); Sarah Reber and Cyrus Kosar, "Vaccine hesitancy in nursing homes isn't all politics," *The Brookings Institution* (August 19, 2021), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/vaccine-hesitancy-in-nursing-homes-isnt-all-politics/>.

⁸ Priya Chidambaram and Rachel Garfield, "Nursing Homes Experienced Steeper Increase In COVID-19 Cases and Deaths in August 2021 Than the Rest of the Country," *Kaiser Family Foundation* (October 1, 2021), <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/nursing-homes-experienced-steeper-increase-in-covid-19-cases-and-deaths-in-august-2021-than-the-rest-of-the-country/>.

⁹ Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, *COVID-19 Nursing Home Data*, <https://data.cms.gov/covid-19/covid-19-nursing-home-data> (accessed December 22, 2021).

2. Researchers have shown that people of color are more likely to live in nursing homes that have low primary vaccination rates, and have had a disproportionately low uptake of booster doses in the general population. What steps is the Biden administration taking to ensure that rates of primary and booster doses are equitable in nursing homes, and that communities of color and other populations disproportionately affected by the pandemic will have ready access to these vaccines?
3. How is the Biden administration seeking to increase primary vaccination rates and booster doses in nursing homes located in rural areas where uptake has tended to be relatively low?
4. Please provide information about any supply chain issues, staffing shortages, or other obstacles that the Biden administration has observed as it relates to facilities obtaining or administering additional primary or booster doses. To the extent such problems exist, how is the administration addressing them?
5. Please outline the steps that HHS is taking to ensure that residents, workers, their families and the public have an accurate and timely view of the pace that additional primary and booster doses of COVID-19 vaccines are being administered in nursing homes.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
Chairman
Special Committee on Aging



Ron Wyden
Chairman
Committee on Finance



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



Mark Kelly
United States Senator