



AMERICAN PHARMACISTS ASSOCIATION
STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE SUBCOMMITTEE
ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS

"A SHOT AT NORMALCY: BUILDING COVID-19 VACCINE CONFIDENCE"

WEDNESDAY, MAY 26, 2021



Chairwoman DeGette, Ranking Member Griffith, and Members of the Subcommittee, the American Pharmacists Association (APhA) is pleased to submit the following Statement for the Record for the U.S. House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing on "A Shot at Normalcy: Building COVID-19 Vaccine Confidence."

APhA is the largest association of pharmacists in the United States advancing the entire pharmacy profession. APhA represents pharmacists in all practice settings, including community pharmacies, hospitals, long-term care facilities, specialty pharmacies, community health centers, physician offices, ambulatory clinics, managed care organizations, hospice settings, and government facilities. Our members strive to improve medication use, advance patient care and enhance public health.

Mitigating Vaccine Hesitancy, Especially Among High-Priority Populations to Promote Health Equity by Maximizing the Use of Trusted Community Pharmacists

Due to the trust earned between pharmacists, their patients, and their communities, pharmacists have opportunities to advance public health through immunization access and advocacy for our nation's vulnerable populations—which is an invaluable asset that should be emphasized under the equitable distribution and administration of the FDA-authorized and approved COVID-19 and other vaccines to break down barriers and ensure health equity.

Pharmacists can facilitate and amplify disease prevention strategies, because many vulnerable and minority populations at higher risk for COVID-19, influenza, and pneumococcal disease visit pharmacies and are seen by pharmacists daily.

Working with local and state public health departments, state and/or national immunization coalitions, local community and other groups (e.g., employers, faith-based organizations, schools, teachers, diabetes, heart, lung, or retired persons' associations), pharmacists can promote vaccination among high-risk minority and underserved populations.

Accordingly, APhA urges the Subcommittee to ensure all legislation focused on vaccine hesitancy and confidence include a strong, fully-funded component for pharmacists to lead education and outreach campaigns within their practices and communities supporting clinically recommended vaccinations to eliminate stigma and improve prevention and health outcomes for high priority and vulnerable patient populations to promote vaccine and health equity.

Expediently Pass Legislation to Make Permanent Pharmacists' Temporary COVID-19 Authorities

During the COVID-19 public health emergency (PHE), pharmacists have demonstrated the ability to significantly expand access to care and equity in care,¹ and they will be able to continue to do so if certain regulatory barriers are permanently removed. The pandemic has demonstrated how essential and accessible pharmacists are in the United States. Pharmacists and pharmacies' lights stayed on from the start of the pandemic and are essential components of public health infrastructure.

Nearly 90 percent of Americans live within five miles of a community pharmacy. Pharmacies often offer extended hours and added convenience. These attributes have greater significance as many individuals and caregivers have limited flexibility to take off from work or school to access these services. Pharmacists are trusted and accessible healthcare professionals with established relationships with their patients. Pharmacists also have strong relationships with local medical providers and hospitals to refer patients as appropriate.

As you know, the fight against COVID-19 has demanded the federal government take action to allow pharmacists and other health care professionals to do more of what they are trained to do. By being more flexible about certain requirements and expanding scope of practice through new authorities, the federal government made it easier for pharmacists to provide care to patients during the COVID-19 PHE. The problem is many of these flexibilities and authorities are not considered permanent and further action is needed to expand access to pharmacist-provided services. If action is not taken by Congress, patients, including many in underserved communities, and many adolescents, will not be able to receive needed immunizations and care at pharmacies across the country once the PHE ends.

Many of these new authorities and flexibilities, including pharmacists' ability to order and administer COVID-19 and childhood vaccines and tests for COVID-19, influenza, and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), as well as pharmacy interns and pharmacy technicians to administer COVID-19 tests, COVID-19 vaccinations, and childhood vaccines to persons aged 3 years or older should continue as they have significantly increased patient access and care.

¹ National Pharmacy Organizations Unite to Take a Stand Against Racial Injustice. June 5, 2020, available at: https://www.accp.com/docs/news/Pharmacy_Statement_On_Racial_Injustice.pdf

Maintaining these authorities, particularly for children and adolescents, is vital as we enter into the next stage of COVID-19 vaccinations. As you know, HHS cited a May 2020 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report which found a troubling drop in routine childhood immunizations as a result of families staying at home.² While families followed public health warnings about going out, an unfortunate result was many missed routine vaccinations. This decrease in childhood vaccination rates is a public health threat and a collateral harm caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, HHS temporarily extended pharmacists' authority to order and administer, as well as pharmacy interns and pharmacy technicians to administer, childhood vaccines to avoid preventable diseases in children, reduce additional strains on the healthcare system, and any further increases in avoidable adverse health consequences—particularly if such complications coincide with an additional resurgence, or variants of COVID-19.³ Clearly, these temporary authorities for pharmacists need to be made permanent to maintain vaccine access for underserved and minority communities to reduce current and future vaccine hesitancy in these communities.

APhA-CDC Joint Efforts

In March 2021, APhA and the CDC entered into a collaborative agreement focused on supporting the role of pharmacists in building the public's confidence in COVID-19 vaccines.

The CDC previously established its goals around improving vaccine confidence in a 3-part strategy designed to build trust, empower health care personnel, and engage communities and individuals. APhA is contributing to this endeavor through a comprehensive program to educate pharmacists and pharmacy personnel on COVID-19 vaccines.

Specifically, APhA has designed a program to support pharmacists by developing tools and education resources for effectively discussing and addressing vaccine concerns with patients; engaging with the public through videos and various media vehicles; and collaborating with other pharmacy organizations, health care providers, and communities in order to enhance vaccine confidence within diverse populations.

Information on the APhA-CDC "Vaccine Confident," campaign is available at:

<https://vaccineconfident.pharmacist.com/>

² Jeanne M. Santoli et al., Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Routine Pediatric Vaccine Ordering and Administration — United States, 2020, CDC, 69 MMWR 591, 592 (2020), <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/pdfs/mm6919e2-H.pdf>

³ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/third-amendment-declaration.pdf>

The project provides support, education, resources, and information that lead to:

- Vaccine Confident Pharmacists;
- Vaccine Confident Patients; and
- Vaccine Confident Communities.

Although data indicates that a growing majority of Americans have received or are planning to receive a COVID-19 vaccine, there remain significant numbers of Americans who are taking a “wait and see” approach, are only planning to get vaccinated if it’s mandatory through work, school, or other activities, or have decided to not receive a COVID-19 vaccine at all.

The data demonstrating the ongoing presence of these vaccine-hesitant individuals show that there is more work to be done in supporting vaccine confidence in order to allow the country to successfully return to a greater level of normalcy.

More than 400,000 pharmacists, student pharmacists and pharmacy technicians have been trained to administer vaccines across the lifespan and stand ready and able to meet the healthcare needs of their patients and communities.⁴ As the Subcommittee knows, pharmacists are already on the front lines, playing a major role in vaccinating Americans against COVID-19. CDC and APhA are building upon the trust that people already have in their pharmacists to provide education about the vaccines, and thoughtfully and comprehensively address patient concerns. Pharmacists will be a critical partner in ensuring that this pandemic is brought under control as quickly as possible.

Just this week, APhA hosted a May 25th National Town Hall on Building Vaccine Confidence where pharmacists shared their experiences, successes, concerns, challenges, strategies, and messages around building vaccine confidence in their communities. APhA would be happy to brief Subcommittee members on the feedback we received during this National Town Hall.

Highlights of APhA’s Nationwide Vaccine Confident Survey

In the latest pulse survey conducted by APhA of our nation’s pharmacists with respondents from every region in the nation, representing a broad range of practice settings (nearly half practicing in community-based settings):

- 88% of pharmacists responding are fully vaccinated against COVID-19, and more than 9 in 10 (92%) said they plan to or have already been vaccinated.

⁴ Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, Pharmacists. visited August 08, 2020, available at: <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/pharmacists.htm>

- An overwhelming percentage of pharmacists responding (98%) also said they were comfortable addressing vaccine confidence and vaccine hesitancy concerns with their patients and other individuals.

The survey continues to demonstrate the growing confidence of pharmacists in the effectiveness and safety of the vaccines, and in their ability to talk to their patients about the importance of receiving vaccines to improve public health and save lives.⁵

The series of surveys conducted since September 2020 demonstrates that as more information and experience is obtained, the willingness to be vaccinated and confidence in having vaccine confidence discussions increases.

Conclusion

APhA would like to thank the Subcommittee for continuing to work with us to support the CDC's Vaccinate with Confidence strategy and by making key COVID-19 health care flexibilities permanent through legislation to decrease vaccine hesitancy and promote health care equity. Please contact Alicia Kerry J. Mica, Senior Lobbyist, at AMica@aphanet.org or by phone at (202) 429-7507 as you consider this issue. We are also happy to assist your efforts to advance H.R. 2759, the Pharmacy and Medically Underserved Areas Enhancement Act, which was recently introduced by a number of bipartisan members of the Subcommittee and full Committee to increase access to pharmacist-provided patient care services in medically underserved communities and help break down the barriers to achieving health care equity in this country.

⁵ <https://pharmacist.com/APhA-Press-Releases/vast-majority-of-pharmacists-surveyed-are-fully-vaccinated-against-covid-19>