

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 10, 2026

The Honorable Robert F. Kennedy Jr.
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
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Secretary of State
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I am writing with deep concern over the inadequate response of both the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as well as the Department of State since the beginning of the hantavirus outbreak on the MV Hondius cruise ship that was carrying 17 American passengers. Decisions made by the Trump Administration have weakened the country's ability to protect American citizens and respond to emerging global health threats, from recklessly firing essential public health officials at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Vessel Sanitation Program as well as at Port Health Stations, to decimating the domestic public health system by cutting research and funding for infectious disease research and detection, and withdrawing from the World Health Organization (WHO).

As of May 10th, three people have died from hantavirus and several others have fallen ill aboard the MV Hondius cruise ship. Although hantavirus is rare, it is deadly, and about 38% of people who develop respiratory symptoms may die. The virus can lead to organ failure, and there is no specific treatment for hantavirus. Additionally, it's reported that the virus infecting people on the cruise ship is the Andes strain, which is the only strain reported to be transmitted person-to-person. The risk of spread between people means that a robust, coordinated public health response between the ship and all of the countries with citizens on board, something that is much harder for the U.S. to engage in due to its withdrawal from the WHO, is necessary to ensure the virus does not spread when passengers return to their home countries. On April 24, 30 passengers, including 6 Americans, disembarked from the ship docked in St. Helena. The U.S. must protect Americans from the hantavirus coming to the U.S. as a result of this outbreak.

The Trump Administration has weakened the federal government's ability to protect Americans from such deadly viruses detected on cruise ships when HHS fired all the full-time employees at the Vessel Sanitation Program last April as part of DOGE's indiscriminate cuts. The program's staffing is uncertain, calling into question the capacity of the program to identify an emerging threat such as hantavirus. These types of staffing cuts not only threaten the health of American families, but it does nothing to save taxpayer dollars, since the Vessel Sanitation Program is funded by fees that cruise ship companies pay.

CDC's lack of investment in Port Health Stations also directly threatens the mission to protect American's health. Right now, it's reported that three of CDC's 20 Port Health Stations have no staff at all, and half have no officer in charge. These stations are the first line of defense against infectious diseases coming into the country, and the chaos created by HHS firings and CDC leadership changes has led to an overreliance on temporary staff. Vulnerabilities at Port Health Stations mean there are not enough key CDC staff to assess humans and animals for disease threats and that ports across the country are not well prepared to contain a viral threat. As the remaining U.S. passengers return to the U.S., a weak Port Health Program translates to less support for defending public health against the possibility of hantavirus spreading on our shores.

The Administration's decision to withhold, and even cut funding and staffing positions, to critical public health programs, infectious disease research, and pandemic preparedness programs across the federal government and country has resulted in a weakened public health system overall. The steps that HHS has taken under current leadership to weaken public health are numerous, from proposing to eliminate \$750 million in preparedness grants for states and localities to firing Epidemic Intelligence Service fellows. The chaos and uncertainty that has plagued the CDC under this Administration has not only weakened the agency's reputation as a premier public health agency, it has significantly handicapped the infrastructure of state and local public health, the people in communities across the country who are dedicated to protecting their neighbors from health threats. With fewer staff and resources, health departments are facing oftentimes insurmountable challenges with respect to outbreak responses. Choosing not to invest in infectious disease research and global health engagement does not mean that the U.S. will not face infectious disease and global health challenges. The myopic decisions to cut necessary funding only kneecaps government's ability to keep its citizens safe.

The Administration's response has been delayed and lacked detailed, transparent communication with the public since the first death of a person aboard the cruise ship due to hantavirus. The CDC was late to notify Americans of the danger this virus poses and has failed to disclose a detailed, coordinated plan with state and local public health departments to monitor the Americans who returned and will return from the ship as passengers are reportedly disembarking today. The uncharacteristically slow response may also be reflective of the reality the CDC currently lacks a permanent leader, with Dr. Battacharya serving as the official performing the delegable duties of the CDC Director. The absence of a clear plan to respond to hantavirus and communicate that plan to the broader public contributes to heightened uncertainty about the capacity of this Administration to keep Americans safe.

The Trump Administration's decision to withdraw from the WHO puts the U.S. at greater public health risk in multi-country outbreaks such as the current hantavirus outbreak on the cruise ship. The WHO plays a leading role in detecting, monitoring, and responding to emerging health threats, pandemics, and diseases of importance. Since the virus cases were detected, the WHO has led the coordinated response given the ship's course in international waters and passengers hailing from multiple countries. While the Trump Administration has boldly claimed that the U.S. will be able to complete the same responsibilities undertaken by the WHO, it is the American public whose lives are put at risk when that claim is tested. Withdrawing from the WHO means the U.S. has no visibility and no access to data in the way that WHO members have

– meaning the response to emerging threats, such as hantavirus, will not be based on the best quality information.

The U.S. is at a disadvantage to protect the public from the dangers of hantavirus, but there is a clear path forward. HHS, CDC, and the State Department must clearly communicate the current status of the hantavirus outbreak and the impact on Americans. Moreover, the Administration must rehire key public health personnel who were indiscriminately fired by DOGE, restore public health funding and infectious disease research, and rejoin the World Health Organization. I request your responses to the following questions by May 17th, 2026:

1. Please detail CDC's involvement with responding to the hantavirus outbreak on the cruise ship, including:
 - a. Number of full-time staff across CDC working on hantavirus response. Provide information on U.S. based and personnel sent to other countries to respond.
 - b. Number of full-time staff at the Port Health Stations.
 - c. Number of full-time staff at the Vessel Sanitation Program.
2. Please detail the current communication channels with WHO regarding the hantavirus outbreak.
3. Please describe the plan to protect the health of the American public and articulate this plan to the public, including any additional traveler screening protocol that will be implemented and communication with airlines.
4. Please describe the communication between CDC and state and local health departments in states who have or will be receiving Americans back from the cruise ship, including ongoing support for departments tasked with contact tracing and possible quarantine measures.

Sincerely,


