

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4704

February 11, 2016

The Honorable Paul Ryan
Speaker, U.S. House of Representatives
The Capitol Building
Washington, D.C. 20004

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader, U.S. Senate
The Capitol Building
Washington, D.C. 20004

Dear Speaker Ryan and Majority Leader McConnell:

The recent and alarming spread of the Zika virus poses a serious threat to pregnant women and their children. We write to urge you to join us in our longstanding support of increasing access to reproductive health care, including contraceptives, for women who choose to use them, worldwide.

When contracted by pregnant women, the virus has been linked to microcephaly, a serious birth defect. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared these Zika-linked birth defects a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern." In the Americas alone, the outbreak could infect up to 4 million people, and local transmission of the virus has been reported in 27 countries and 3 U.S. territories. Fifty-two travel-related Zika infections have been reported in 16 states and the District of Columbia, and last week, Dallas, Texas, health officials announced a case of the virus that had been sexually transmitted by a returning traveler, the first known case of the virus being acquired within the continental United States. Our government has a critical role to play in addressing health inequities for women in Zika-affected countries, including here at home, and in ensuring that women everywhere have access to critical health care services.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other health authorities have issued travel guidance to women who are pregnant or trying to become pregnant to delay travel to impacted areas and, if they must travel, to take steps to prevent mosquito bites. In some impacted areas, women are being told to delay pregnancies; for example, the Minister of Health in El Salvador told women to delay pregnancy until 2018. Advising women to delay pregnancy is especially problematic since¹, as Human Rights Watch has documented, women in these regions have limited access to birth control and reproductive health care. According to multiple experts,

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/as-zika-virus-spreads-el-salvador-asks-women-not-to-get-pregnant-until-2018/2016/01/22/1dc2dad-c11f-11e5-98c8-7fab78677d51_story.html ; <http://time.com/4197318/zika-virus-latin-america-avoid-pregnancy/> ;

including the CDC, the Pan American Health Organization, and the WHO², women in many Zika-affected countries experience high rates of sexual violence³ and experience other barriers to accessing basic health care services. Furthermore, in the impacted 18 Latin American countries and the Caribbean⁴, the contraceptive prevalence rate, which measures access to contraceptives, in some countries is very low (in the 30 percent range). In contrast, the United States' contraceptive prevalence rate is 76 percent.⁵ This means that women in countries most impacted by Zika are more likely to be at risk of bearing children with Zika-linked birth defects because of where they live and less likely to have access to contraception services. It is readily apparent that directives from health authorities regarding delaying pregnancy fail to take into account the actual ability of women in these countries to choose the timing of their pregnancies. The United States must act to provide the assistance necessary to minimize the potentially devastating effects of the virus worldwide, and this response must include family planning resources.

It is imperative that any global response to the Zika virus must include a robust and focused effort on expanding access to women's health care services. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the U.S. Agency on International Development (USAID), the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), and the CDC collectively work to increase access to family planning services, reduce maternal and infant mortality, prevent and treat HIV/AIDS, and provide support for communities in need of aid. These agencies and programs will play a critical role in helping women under the duress of Zika, as they are focused on ensuring that pregnant women in many affected areas have access to comprehensive prenatal care and to contraceptive services so they may choose the timing of their pregnancies. The ability to choose the timing of a pregnancy is a critical right for women, especially at this juncture. It is imperative that we support and promote these agencies and programs as they support women both in the U.S. and across the globe during this public health crisis.

Zika's disproportionate impact on pregnant women and their infants highlights the need for reproductive health and family planning to be included in public health efforts. We urge you to recognize the true nature of this public health emergency and work with us to improve women's access to contraceptives and other basic public health needs by supporting

- increased funding and support for UNFPA, PEPFAR, USAID, and CDC, to work on maternal and child health and access to reproductive health care services, including family planning, in Zika-impacted areas; and

² Pan American Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), http://www.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=20441&Itemid=2518; World Health Organization, http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/77434/1/WHO_RHR_12.37_eng.pdf.

³ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/26/dispatches-zika-warnings-versus-realities-women-face>

⁴ Kaiser Family Foundation- Barbados, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Cost Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Suriname, and Venezuela (as of February 01, 2015) http://kff.org/global-health-policy/perspective/zika-virus-the-challenge-for-women/?utm_campaign=KFF-2016-February-Zika-Virus&utm_content=27184995&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.

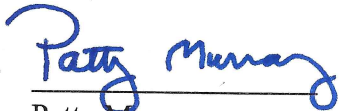
⁵ Kaiser Family Foundation, <http://kff.org/global-indicator/contraceptive-prevalence-rate/>

- increased funding for domestic women's health programs, such as the Title X clinics, CDC and the Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Program, along with other valuable programs that provide critical access to birth control, counseling and education.

Now is the time to bolster women's access to family planning services to support women in Zika-impacted countries and here in the United States as part of immediate preventive measures. This effort must accompany increased research to better understand the Zika virus and its link to birth defects, and develop diagnostic tests, treatments, and vaccines to prevent future outbreaks. By taking action now, we can make significant progress toward mitigating the impact of the Zika virus abroad and preventing the spread of the virus' harm to women and their families.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,



Patty Murray
United States Senator



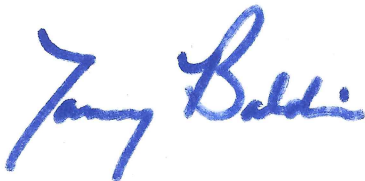
Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



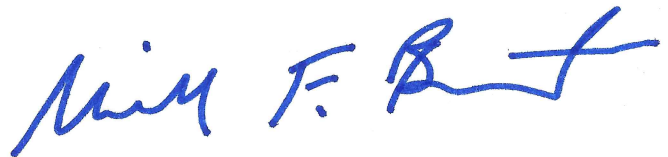
Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



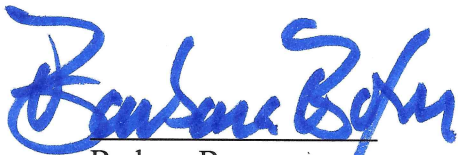
Mazi K. Hirono
United States Senator

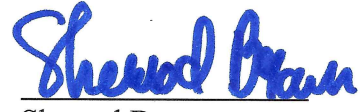



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

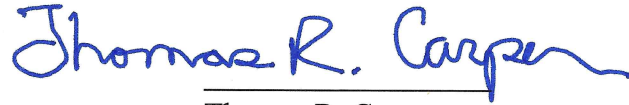


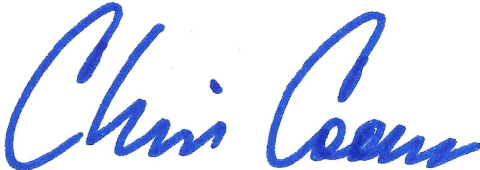
Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



Barbara Boxer
United States Senator



Sherrod Brown
United States Senator


Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator


Thomas R. Carper
United States Senator


Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator

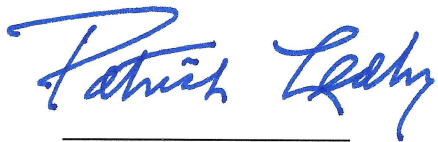

Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator


Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator


Al Franken
United States Senator


Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

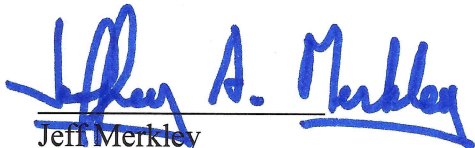

Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



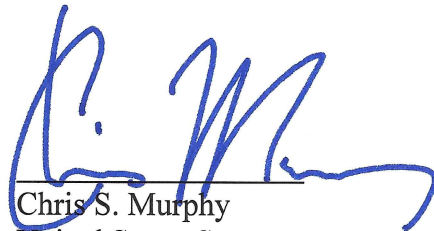
Patrick J. Leahy
United States Senator



Claire McCaskill
United States Senator



Jeff Merkley
United States Senator



Chris S. Murphy
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



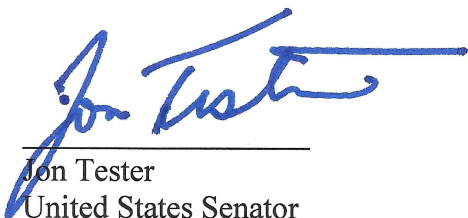
Brian Schatz
United States Senator



Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator



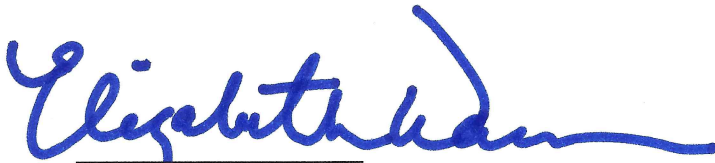
Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator




Jon Tester
United States Senator



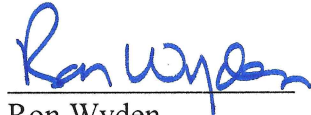
Tom Udall
United States Senator



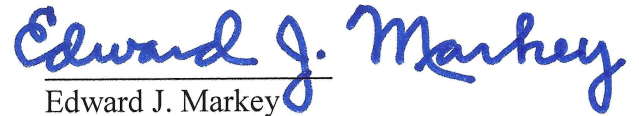
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



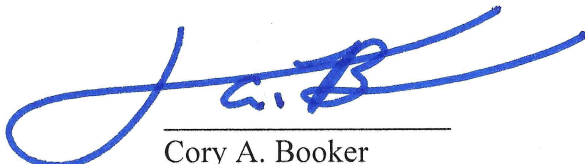
Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator