

Congress of the United States  
Washington, DC 20515

March 2, 2021

Dear Director Walensky,

We write to urge you to include moderate-to-severe asthma in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) list of underlying medical conditions that increase the risk for severe illness from COVID-19. We have grown increasingly concerned by the inequitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and believe the failure to list asthma, a lung disease that disproportionately impacts communities of color, is a contributing factor in that unequal distribution.

The science is clear, individuals with preexisting lung conditions are more susceptible to severe COVID disease. A nationwide study conducted by Harvard’s public health researchers found that fine particulate matter, which causes respiratory illnesses like asthma, increases the risk of dying from COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the CDC recognized this correlation when it listed current and former smokers of any age as being at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19. As with smokers, asthmatics with moderate-to-severe symptoms have a harder time fending off respiratory infections, yet the more than 25 million Americans suffering from asthma are not currently considered to be at risk of severe COVID disease.<sup>2</sup> The omission of asthma from the CDC’s list of underlying conditions means that asthma patients who live in states that closely adhere to CDC guidelines do not have priority access to vaccines.

As with many medical conditions, the burden of asthma is disproportionately experienced in communities of color that already face greater infection, hospitalization, and death rates compared to their white counterparts. According to the American Lung Association, nearly 11% of all Black individuals were estimated to have asthma compared to 7.7% of white individuals in 2018.<sup>3</sup> Respiratory conditions like moderate-to-severe asthma only worsen outcomes in communities of color as studies have shown that Black patients with asthma suffer from more severe COVID-19 symptoms. As a result, the prevalence of asthma in communities of color may likely be a contributing factor to people of color dying from COVID at a rate three times higher than those who are white.<sup>4 5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Friedman, The New York Times, “New Research Links Air Pollution to Higher Coronavirus Death Rates” (April, 2020)

<https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/hsph-in-the-news/air-pollution-linked-with-higher-covid-19-death-rates/>

<sup>2</sup> Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, “Asthma Facts and Figures” (June, 2019) <https://www.aafa.org/asthma-facts/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Centers%20for,in%2013%20people%20have%20asthma.&text=More%20than%2025%20million%20Americans,age%2C%20sex%20and%20racial%20groups.>

<sup>3</sup> American Lung Association, “Current Asthma Demographics” (July, 2020) [https://www.lung.org/research/trends-in-lung-disease/asthma-trends-brief/current-demographics#:~:text=In%202018%2C%20Blacks%20\(10.9%25\),other%20racial%20and%20ethnic%20groups.](https://www.lung.org/research/trends-in-lung-disease/asthma-trends-brief/current-demographics#:~:text=In%202018%2C%20Blacks%20(10.9%25),other%20racial%20and%20ethnic%20groups.)

<sup>4</sup> Sherita Hill Golden, M.D., M.H.S., “Coronavirus in African Americans and Other People of Color” (April, 2020)

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/covid19-racial-disparities>

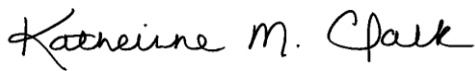
<sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Risk for COVID-19 Infection, Hospitalization, and Death By Race/Ethnicity” (February, 2021) <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>

This is why states like Delaware, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and New York have already acknowledged moderate-to-severe asthma as a significant risk and prioritized asthma patients for vaccination access. However, in the pursuit of equity, we believe that it is incumbent upon your agency to revisit the “at increased risk” priority list and consider including this critical medical condition.

From the onset, the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the failures of our health care system to protect vulnerable communities. We fear that failure to include moderate-to-severe asthma as a qualifying comorbidity exacerbates existing racial inequities in health care access and compounds the disproportionate impact that the pandemic has on communities of color. As such, we urge you to swiftly amend the CDC’s list of medical conditions at increased risk to be inclusive of moderate-to-severe asthma.

Thank you for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,



Katherine Clark  
Member of Congress



Nanette Diaz Barragán  
Member of Congress

Jerrold Nadler  
Member of Congress

Yvette D. Clarke  
Member of Congress

Lucille Roybal-Allard  
Member of Congress

Lisa Blunt Rochester  
Member of Congress

Mary Gay Scanlon  
Member of Congress

Ro Khanna  
Member of Congress

Rashida Tlaib  
Member of Congress

Bonnie Watson Coleman  
Member of Congress

Terri A. Sewell  
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Member of Congress

Ritchie Torres  
Member of Congress

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Member of Congress

Madeleine Dean  
Member of Congress

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Member of Congress

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Member of Congress

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Member of Congress

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Member of Congress

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Member of Congress

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Member of Congress

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Member of Congress

Jim Cooper  
Member of Congress

Jake Auchincloss  
Member of Congress

Alan Lowenthal  
Member of Congress