

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

December 20, 2019

The Honorable Alex Azar
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Ave, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Robert R. Redfield, MD
Director
U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road, NE
Atlanta, GA 30329

Dear Secretary Azar and Director Dr. Redfield,

In October 2019, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released new data indicating rates of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) continue to rise across the country, and women are paying the price. According to the CDC's annual *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance Report*, the number of combined cases of syphilis, gonorrhea, and chlamydia have reached an all-time high in the United States, marking the fifth consecutive year of increases for the three leading federally-notifiable STDs. While the CDC continues to provide resources to state and local health departments for STD prevention and surveillance, it is imperative that the Administration undertake initiatives and allocate resources to mitigate the STD epidemic in coordination with state and local partners.

The increases in STD rates only capture a fraction of the number of cases that are seen every year because most cases of chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis go undiagnosed and unreported. STDs that are undiagnosed, and therefore untreated, put women at risk for severe, life-long health complications such as pelvic inflammatory disease, infertility, ectopic pregnancies, chronic pelvic pain, and increased risk of HIV transmission.¹²

Each of these STDs can cause severe health issues for women. Chlamydia is the most commonly reported STD, with about 1.8 million cases this past year alone – the most ever reported to CDC. Untreated chlamydia is a contributing factor to infertility and it is estimated that undiagnosed STDs cause infertility in more than 24,000 women each year.³ Currently, gonorrhea only responds to one drug due to drug-resistant strains of the infection. Drug-resistant gonorrhea, also known as “super gonorrhea,” is a real threat to being able to successfully control the spread of gonorrhea in the U.S. Without treatment, gonorrhea can result in infertility among both men and women. Last year, there were a total of 116,000 cases of syphilis reported to the CDC. The number of primary and secondary syphilis cases – the most infectious stages of syphilis – nearly doubled over the past five years-- to more than 35,000

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (September 2017). *STDs and HIV- CDC Fact Sheet*. <https://www.cdc.gov/std/hiv/stdfact-std-hiv-detailed.htm>

² Jones, J; Weiss, K; Mermin, J; Dietz, P; Rosenberg, E.S.; Gift, T.L.; Chesson, H; Sullivan, P.S.; Lyles, C; Bernstein, K.T.; Jenness, S.M. *Proportion of Incident HIV Cases Among Men Who Have Sex with Men: A Modeling Analysis*. Sexually Transmitted Diseases. 2019 January 19.

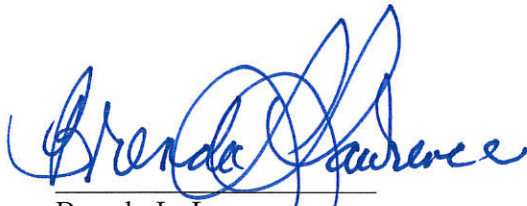
³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of STD Prevention (September 2018). *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance 2017*. https://www.cdc.gov/std/stats17/2017-STD-Surveillance-Report_CDC-clearance-9.10.18.pdf.

cases, the highest number reported since 1991. Among newborns, syphilis cases increased 40 percent to more than 1,300 cases. Forty percent of congenital syphilis cases result in stillbirth or newborn death, while others have life-long health consequences.

Most STDs are treatable, and with proper surveillance, outreach, and treatment, state and local health departments can prevent new STD cases and eliminate congenital syphilis. However, in order to adequately address this issue, the federal government must take the steps necessary toward STD prevention and eradication. Please provide a response to the Bipartisan Women’s Caucus on the steps that are being taken now, and plans for future action to address this issue by March 1, 2020.

Thank you for your attention to this matter, and we look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,



Brenda L. Lawrence
Member of Congress



Debbie Lesko
Member of Congress



Madeleine Dean
Member of Congress



Jenniffer González Colón
Member of Congress