

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5051
MINORITY (202) 225-5074
<https://oversight.house.gov>

July 20, 2022

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Becerra:

I write with concern about the rapidly increasing spread of the monkeypox virus (MPV) across the United States, and to urge the Department of Health and Human Services to act swiftly to ensure that vaccines, testing, and treatment are available to all people who seek them, including people with MPV symptoms or suspected exposure.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than 2,100 MPV cases have been confirmed in 43 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.¹ This represents a more than threefold increase in cases over the last 13 days.²

I commend the Biden Administration for the steps it has already taken to respond to the MPV outbreak, including the vaccine strategy announced on June 28 that is increasing the number of vaccine doses available for high-risk individuals and will continue to increase vaccine availability in the coming months.³ I am also pleased the Administration will be taking steps to make testing more accessible and to raise awareness about MPV among both high-risk groups and the general public.⁴

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *2022 U.S. Map & Case Count* (online at www.cdc.gov/poxvirus/monkeypox/response/2022/us-map.html) (accessed July 18, 2022).

² University of Minnesota Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy, *US Monkeypox Cases Top 600 in 34 States* (July 7, 2022) (online at www.cidrap.umn.edu/news-perspective/2022/07/us-monkeypox-cases-top-600-34-states).

³ The White House, *Fact Sheet: Biden-Harris Administration's Monkeypox Outbreak Response* (June 28, 2022) (online at www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/28/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administrations-monkeypox-outbreak-response/).

⁴ *Id.*

The JYNNEOS vaccine, which has been approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), can prevent infection if administered before—or directly after—exposure to the virus.⁵ However, demand for the vaccine currently outpaces supply in major cities, including New York City; Washington, D.C.; and Los Angeles; which are experiencing the brunt of the current outbreak.⁶ More than 1.5 million people in the United States are currently eligible for MPV vaccination, but as of July 15, 132,000 doses of the vaccine had been administered nationwide.⁷ In New York City, vaccine appointments fill up within minutes.⁸

I am also concerned that both CDC and commercial laboratories lack adequate capacity to test people experiencing monkeypox symptoms, as well as people who have been directly exposed to the virus. Although commercial laboratories are already scaling up their testing capacities, patients spend an average of one week or more waiting for a result.⁹

Not all hospital systems and health care providers are testing for the virus, which means that many symptomatic patients are being denied tests.¹⁰ Experts have warned that a failure to ramp up testing in the early stages of the outbreak has likely foreclosed containment of community spread.¹¹ Because there is no rapid test for monkeypox, it is particularly important that patients who present at clinics are not turned away from testing.

In addition to access to vaccines and testing, patients who have contracted MPV must be able to obtain appropriate treatment. In recent days, reports have emerged that patients are facing barriers and extreme difficulties in accessing TPOXX, the only antiviral medication clinically shown to decrease duration of disease and reduce the risk of fatality. Currently, CDC must approve the administration of this medication on a case-by-case basis. CDC and FDA need to ensure they are re-evaluating their protocols quickly enough to keep up with this outbreak and that patients can access this potentially life-saving medication when they need it.

These barriers to accessing treatment implicate health equity, as evidence suggests that the patients most likely to access TPOXX currently have private insurance or a primary care

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Smallpox/Monkeypox Vaccine Information Statement (VIS)* (June 1, 2022) (online at www.cdc.gov/vaccines/hcp/vis/vis-statements/smallpox-monkeypox.html).

⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *2022 U.S. Map & Case Count* (online at www.cdc.gov/poxvirus/monkeypox/response/2022/us-map.html) (accessed July 18, 2022).

⁷ *Demand for Monkeypox Vaccine Rises with Case Counts, but Supply Remains Low*, CNN (July 14, 2022) (online at www.cnn.com/2022/07/14/health/monkeypox-vaccine-demand/index.html).

⁸ *Monkeypox Vaccine Rollout Is Marred by Glitches in New York*, New York Times (July 7, 2022) (online at www.nytimes.com/2022/07/07/nyregion/monkeypox-vaccine-rollout.html).

⁹ *For Monkeypox Patients, Excruciating Symptoms and a Struggle for Care*, New York Times (July 18, 2022) (online at www.nytimes.com/2022/07/18/nyregion/new-york-monkeypox-vaccine.html).

¹⁰ *Problems with Monkeypox Testing Mean the Outbreak May Be Far Bigger than Reported*, National Public Radio (June 23, 2022) (online at www.npr.org/2022/06/23/1107151098/problems-with-monkeypox-testing-mean-the-outbreak-may-be-far-bigger-than-reporte).

¹¹ *U.S. Monkeypox Response Has Been Woefully Inadequate, Experts Say*, Scientific American (July 14, 2022) (online at www.scientificamerican.com/article/monkeypox-testing-and-vaccination-in-u-s-have-been-vastly-inadequate-experts-say1/).

physician, which many Americans lack.¹² The MPV outbreak is disproportionately impacting members of the LGBTQ+ community, which already experiences higher rates of illness and health challenges and may face increased barriers to obtaining health care.¹³ Although MPV does not appear to be a sexually transmitted infection, physical contact is understood to be the primary means of transmission for the virus, making social and sexual networks a key pathway of transmission.¹⁴ Researchers suspect that the outbreak began in Europe at events attended primarily by men who have sex with men (MSM), and a disproportionate number of cases in the current outbreak have been identified in MSM and people who are transgender.¹⁵ Studies have found that the cost of health care and experiences of discrimination lead many LGBTQ+ individuals to postpone or avoid medical treatment.¹⁶ In the context of an infectious disease outbreak, it is particularly urgent that we overcome these barriers and reach those most impacted and at-risk.

Given the serious threat monkeypox poses to the public health of the United States, I urge HHS to build on actions the Administration has already taken and act swiftly to ensure an adequate supply of MPV testing, treatment, and vaccines. In addition, I request responses to the following questions by August 3, 2022. I also request a staff briefing on the following topics by August 5, 2022.

1. What additional steps is the Department taking to ensure an adequate and timely supply of MPV vaccine?
2. What steps is the Department taking to expand access to affordable MPV testing for people who have symptoms of MPV or may have been exposed to MPV?
3. What steps is the Department taking to facilitate access to affordable treatment for patients who contract MPV?
4. What steps is the Department taking to release smallpox vaccines and antivirals from the Strategic National Stockpile?

¹² *Monkeypox Vaccine Rollout Is Marred by Glitches in New York*, New York Times (July 7, 2022) (online at www.nytimes.com/2022/07/07/nyregion/monkeypox-vaccine-rollout.html).

¹³ Kaiser Family Foundation, *Health and Access to Care and Coverage for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Individuals in the U.S.* (May 3, 2018) (online at www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/issue-brief/health-and-access-to-care-and-coverage-for-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-individuals-in-the-u-s).

¹⁴ *Monkeypox and the Gay Community*, New York Times (June 24, 2022) (online at www.nytimes.com/2022/06/24/briefing/monkeypox-gay-community.html); *For Monkeypox Patients, Excruciating Symptoms and a Struggle for Care*, New York Times (July 18, 2022) (online at www.nytimes.com/2022/07/18/nyregion/new-york-monkeypox-vaccine.html).

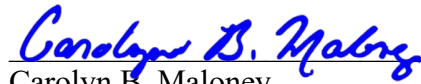
¹⁵ *Monkeypox and the Gay Community*, New York Times (June 24, 2022) (online at www.nytimes.com/2022/06/24/briefing/monkeypox-gay-community.html); *For Monkeypox Patients, Excruciating Symptoms and a Struggle for Care*, New York Times (July 18, 2022) (online at www.nytimes.com/2022/07/18/nyregion/new-york-monkeypox-vaccine.html).

¹⁶ See, e.g., Center for American Progress, *The State of the LGBTQ Community in 2020* (Oct. 6, 2020) (online at www.americanprogress.org/article/state-lgbtq-community-2020/).

5. What steps is the Department taking to address the disproportionate threat MPV poses to LGBTQ+ people in the United States?

The Committee on Oversight and Reform is the principal oversight committee of the House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X. If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact Committee staff at (202) 225-5051.

Sincerely,



Carolyn B. Maloney
Chairwoman

cc: The Honorable James Comer, Ranking Member