

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 14, 2026

The Honorable Robert F. Kennedy Jr.  
Secretary of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Kennedy,

Given the growing threat of hantavirus, we write with a simple request: let the experts speak. The Department of Health and Human Services and particularly the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) employ hundreds of infectious disease experts, and their knowledge is needed now more than ever. We have been alarmed by reports that political appointees have been muzzling CDC communications, and we urge you to allow our nation's expert scientists and physicians to speak candidly, without political interference. Given your previously expressed commitment to "radical transparency," we expect you will be able to easily honor this commitment.

The first death from this outbreak of the hantavirus was on April 11, 2026.<sup>1</sup> The second death was two weeks later, on April 26. The World Health Organization (WHO) received notice about the potential outbreak on May 2. However, the CDC did not put out an alert on the Health Alert Network (HAN) to public health practitioners, officials, laboratorians and clinicians until May 8, nearly a month after the first death, nearly two weeks after the second death, and six days after the WHO received its first notification.

CDC held its first briefing on May 9, but only for invited press. According to reports, the invited media "could not cite the speakers by name under rules set by aides to Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr."<sup>2</sup> An open press briefing in Nebraska on May 11 provided more answers, and we urge you to give CDC experts the flexibility to share information as it changes.

Let us be clear: we have complete confidence in the career experts at CDC who are, and have been, working to respond to this potential threat. What concerns us is the Administration's potential hamstringing of those experts' ability to convey scientifically backed information to the public. The absence of a trusted voice allows conspiracy theorists and misinformation to fester, creating more panic. Getting factual, real-time information gives the American people confidence in the U.S.'s ability to keep them safe.

We also worry that this outbreak shows the gaps in our country's ability to respond to threats, considering the United States' recent withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO). Additionally, the CDC has been crippled by staffing cuts over the past year, which has undoubtedly weakened its ability to promptly respond to emerging health threats. According to numbers shared to Congress by HHS in April 2026, CDC has lost over 26 percent of its staff, or

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<sup>1</sup> *Hantavirus cluster linked to cruise ship travel, Multi-country*, World Health Organization (May 8, 2026), <https://www.who.int/emergencies/disease-outbreak-news/item/2026-DON600>

<sup>2</sup> Mike Stobbe, *Experts wonder 'Where is the CDC?' as a hantavirus outbreak unfolds on a cruise ship*, Associated Press (May 9, 2026), <https://apnews.com/article/cdc-hantavirus-cruise-ship-trump-who-2eaf686534d31e8ad67482f05e1ec870>

3,369 employees, since January 2025.<sup>3</sup> These reckless staffing cuts call into question whether the beleaguered agency and HHS as a whole can effectively fulfill its role of leading preparedness and response efforts to a larger outbreak or epidemic.

According to experts, the current strain of the hantavirus outbreak has historically required very close contact with symptomatic individuals. However, if this virus or a different virus with high transmission and case fatality rates circulates, the country's lack of involvement with WHO, staffing shortages at CDC, and absence of frequent communication from experts will be a recipe for disaster. The least this Administration can do is allow CDC to communicate publicly to build trust with the American people and to keep families safe.

We do not need a lengthy or extensive response to our request. We respectfully request a “yes” or “no” to the following question: **With the growing threat of hantavirus, will you permit public health experts and scientists at the CDC, and not the Administration's political appointees, to make the final decisions on what is said to the public, when it is said, and through what manner, about the hantavirus and other infectious disease threats?**

We also request a briefing on efforts to respond to this outbreak by CDC career subject matter experts within one week of receipt of this letter.

Sincerely,



Raphael Warnock  
United States Senator



Angela D. Alsobrooks  
United States Senator



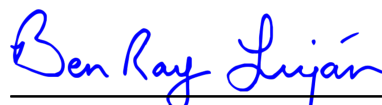
Michael F. Bennet  
United States Senator



Lisa Blunt Rochester  
United States Senator



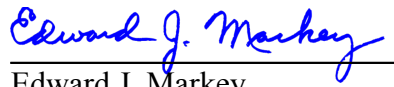
John Hickenlooper  
United States Senator



Ben Ray Lujan  
United States Senator

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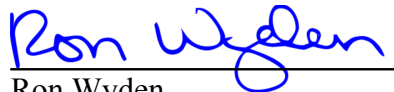
<sup>3</sup> Data provided via email from Department staff to Senate HELP Committee on 4/13/26.



Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator



Ron Wyden  
United States Senator