



COVID-19 Concerns: How Will the Health Department Protect Those With HIV?

U.S. senators send letter urging the Trump administration to ensure equal access to care for all.

March 23, 2020 By [Trent Straube](#)

“We write to share our concerns about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the 1.1 million Americans living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).” So begins a [letter by 11 Democratic U.S. senators](#), including three recent candidates for president, that was sent to Alex Azar, who leads the Department of Health and Human Services.

“COVID-19 poses a serious health risk for individuals living with HIV, and this risk is heightened by barriers to health care access,” the letter continues. “Your agency’s actions to reduce health care discrimination protections for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community have created additional risks for this population during this national emergency. We aim to call your attention [to] these issues and urge you to take affirmative action to ensure everyone in the United States, including people living with HIV, can safely access COVID-19 testing, treatments, and support services.”

We need to ensure EVERYONE—INCLUDING people living with HIV—can safely access [#COVID19](#) testing, treatments, and support services.

Read our letter:

<https://t.co/rWRiYInTMN><https://t.co/CJEW3oB1Qc>

— Senator Bob Menendez (@SenatorMenendez) [March](#)

20, 2020

The letter was signed by senators Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin, Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, Christopher Coons of Delaware, Tammy Duckworth of Illinois, Chris Van Hollen of Maryland, Robert Menendez of New Jersey, Gary Peters of Michigan, Charles Schumer of New York and recent presidential contenders Kamala Harris of California, Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota and Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts.

[Menendez told NBC News](#) that the Trump administration never mentions the HIV community when talking about those threatened by COVID-19 and hasn't taken any action to boost services for this population.

"They've done a poor job of meeting the needs of the community at large," Menendez told NBC. "They certainly have been paying no particular attention to communities that have special needs."

Each year, the U.S. health department awards over \$500 billion in taxpayer-funded grants and contracts, and the Trump administration wants to allow organizations that receive the funds to refuse to serve LGBTQ people and other minorities if doing so would go against their religious faith. The letter points out that eliminating protections against discrimination makes it harder for LGBTQ people—who make up a large proportion of the HIV community—to access health care.

What's more, the letter urges Secretary Azar to ease restrictions on refills of prescription meds, such as those for HIV treatment, so people with chronic illnesses can stock up on lifesaving medications.

The letter closes by posing five questions to Azar to help the senators ascertain how well the health department will serve those living with HIV. For example, will COVID-19 public health messaging include people living with HIV and will HHS ensure that health workers provide equal care to everyone "regardless of their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity/presentation, ability, age, national origin, immigration status, race, or ethnicity?"

You can read the [full text of the senators' letter as a PDF here](#) and in a press release from [Harris's office here](#).

In related news, keep in mind that novel coronavirus guidance and concerns for unique populations may vary. For example, see "[3 Reasons COVID-19 Poses a Higher Risk for the LGBTQ Population](#)," "[UPDATED: What People With HIV Need to Know About the New Coronavirus](#)" and the similar article for [people with cancer](#).

Go to [poz.com/tag/coronavirus](https://www.poz.com/tag/coronavirus) for our continuing coverage of COVID-19.

