



CALIFORNIA HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES AGENCY

Office of the Secretary

September 28, 2021

Dear State Government Colleagues:

Today, I had a wake-up call. In reading the announcement of another tragic, preventable loss of a member of our state family to COVID-19, leaving a wife and two young children behind, I realized that I haven't done enough. I should say, we haven't done enough.

Despite our work to avoid it, we have allowed an invaluable, life-saving health intervention become more complicated, more polarizing, more confusing than anything seen before in modern medicine. I know there are many communities across our state that have unequivocally embraced the COVID-19 vaccine and others that have not. Those who have not say they don't trust the science – they feel the vaccines came together too fast to be safe or trusted. They are concerned about its effect on fertility. Some don't feel it aligns with their values – religious or community. They feel it is a political symbol they don't subscribe to – getting vaccinated would be like turning their back on their party or country. Others just don't think they need it, that they can beat COVID-19 without it.

Our state has made significant progress in figuring out how to work through these hesitations. Now, most Californians have been safely and effectively vaccinated and are reaping the benefits. It shows up in the data I see every morning – those areas of California with many people who are vaccinated suffer less from the wrath of the Delta variant than those with lower vaccination rates. Despite fears, concerns, or opposition, many formerly reluctant Californians have received their vaccine. When I've asked them how they feel now – not a one says they regret getting vaccinated. A few say they still aren't sure if they needed it, but they aren't upset they ultimately became vaccinated. Others are happy they made the choice and only wonder what took them so long.

So, today, as I write this letter, I don't come equipped with a fancy, new message to convince you. I have the same data about the vaccine being safe – pointing to the vaccine's effectiveness. The only thing that is different, I suppose, is the current context. For whatever reason that has held you out from getting vaccinated, I implore you to reconsider.

I implore you because reading these exhausting and heart-breaking announcements about fallen public servants to a preventable death cannot go on without more action. There aren't just one or two of these family tragedies, there are now hundreds. If there is one thing almost all of us have in common, it is the joy of being with family, being in community, having fun with those we love. With my own staff, I have celebrated many wonderful births, graduations, birthday parties, retirements and more. The joy our colleagues get from these milestones is frankly what keeps us going.

I know almost all of you would sacrifice everything to protect, not just those in your family, but the entire notion of what your family is to you – fun, supportive, emotional, loving. Why would risk it over something preventable? If I told you that your notion of family is at-risk, but there is a simple way to avoid this potential risk, I think most of us would jump to the front of the line to receive this simple way.

Nine-plus months after starting our effort to vaccinate Californians, with millions of Californians safely vaccinated and yet thousands of unvaccinated Californians infected and sick in our hospitals, I'll remind you and implore you to reconsider using the ultimate tool we have to protect our notion of family: the COVID-19 vaccine.

To put it simply, embrace your strong, fun, happy notion of family and community over the alternative by getting vaccinated. Don't do it for me. Do it for them, those you love and who love you back. I promise, you won't regret it.

The urgency is real. Lead for your family now.

Your partner in state service,


Mark Ghaly, MD, MPH
Secretary