

June 17, 2020

Robert R. Redfield, M.D.
Director Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road Atlanta, GA 3032

Dear Director Redfield:

We are a coalition of Georgia professionals from the fields of public health, medicine, law and immigration, who have come together to urge you to rescind the Centers for Disease Control's May 19 order¹ closing U.S. borders indefinitely in response to the COVID-19 crisis. The order excludes people on the basis of immigration status, rather than legitimate public health concerns, and is an unprecedented departure from CDC's core principles.

In Georgia, we take justifiable pride in the CDC and applaud it when it insists on science-based public health measures in the face of political attacks, including during the current pandemic. In an open letter to the Atlanta Journal Constitution on May 16,² our Georgia colleagues addressed recent criticism of the CDC's response, reminding the nation of the institution's 70-year history and unparalleled expertise in protecting the U.S. from public health threats and warning that, now more than ever, "we need the CDC's scientific independence and unstifled voice."

We agree with our colleagues and, for this reason, we are deeply dismayed that you have chosen to sacrifice CDC's independence and allow CDC's voice to be used instead to advance the current administration's anti-immigration policies. This not only damages the CDC's reputation as a global public health authority, but it hurts all of us who have come to depend on CDC for credible, unbiased guidance.

The May 19 order indefinitely extends your order of March 20 "Suspending Introduction of Certain Persons from Countries Where a Communicable Disease Exists." In it, you claim that people without "valid travel documents" pose a threat to public health because they are detained for long periods of time in close quarters at ports of entry and border patrol stations. You state that traditional public health approaches, such as inspection and quarantine used to contain cholera in the 1890s and SARS in 2003, are impractical. While you make some exceptions, including for American border-crossers, you make no exception for asylum-seekers, torture survivors, or unaccompanied children fleeing for their lives in search of refuge.

Outcry from the public health community was swift. On May 18, public health and medical professionals from across the nation sent you a letter, highlighting multiple concerns with the order and recommending measures 'grounded' in real public health guidance.³

"Rather than imposing a ban or suspension on people seeking protection from harm, U.S. authorities

¹ <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/03/24/2020-06238/control-of-communicable-diseases-foreign-quarantine-suspension-of-introduction-of-persons-into>

² <https://www.ajc.com/news/opinion/opinion-cdc-essential-controlling-covid-rebuilding-economy/R98E86Sd9fsSsOjthzMcqN/>

³ <https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/public-health-now/news/public-health-experts-urge-us-officials-withdraw-order-enabling-mass-expulsion-asylum-seekers>

should use evidence-based public health measures to process asylum seekers and other persons crossing the U.S. border. Asylum seekers and migrants should not be discriminated against due to their immigration status or displacement and should not be subjected to more stringent health restrictions at the border than other persons.”

On May 27, another letter signed by more than 250 legal, faith-based, humanitarian, human rights, and community organizations expanded upon these concerns, highlighting that “these expulsions blatantly violate U.S. law and treaty obligations to protect those seeking humanitarian protection.”⁴

As Georgia health, law and immigration experts who have long supported and often worked collaboratively with the CDC, we have joined these letters and added our voices to those of our colleagues nationwide. We ask you to reclaim the CDC’s voice and independence, to safeguard public health while upholding our nation’s commitment to protect the lives of asylum seekers, torture survivors and unaccompanied children. In short, we ask you to rescind the May 19 order when it is up for review on June 20.

Sincerely,

Georgia’s Legal and Immigrants’ Rights Community

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⁴ <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/resource/indefinite-suspension-protections-asylum-seekers-and-unaccompanied-children-under-may-19>

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