Open Letter to Americans in Recognition of National Immunization Awareness Month

We, the undersigned, support immunizations as the safest, most effective way to control and eradicate infectious diseases. This August, as another National Immunization Awareness Month comes to a close, we are reminded that diseases such as smallpox and polio were once commonplace in the United States. Thanks to vaccinations, we have not seen or experienced many of the infectious diseases that gripped past generations, but other countries have not been so fortunate and outbreaks continue in the United States.

As we approach the 30th anniversaries of global smallpox eradication and the last polio case reported in the United States, new infectious diseases, such as novel H1N1 influenza, are emerging and others continue to strike the unprotected. This should remind us of the continuing importance of timely immunizations. Our strong immunization infrastructure will ensure our ability to meet the challenges presented by these diseases, but Americans have to do their part by getting themselves and their loved ones vaccinated.

Childhood and adult infectious diseases pose a real threat to personal and public health. Those who are not vaccinated leave not only themselves, but others vulnerable to dangerous diseases. Vaccines are the most effective option for preventing and stopping the spread of infectious diseases.

Vaccines Save Lives

- Immunization has cut measles incidence in the U.S. by 99.9%. However, vaccination is still essential as illustrated by the number of measles cases hitting a decade high in 2008.
- Immunization wiped out smallpox in 1979. Before smallpox was eradicated, it killed over 300 million people in the 20th century – more than all wars combined.
- Vaccination eradicated paralytic polio from the Western Hemisphere. Before a vaccine was available, polio affected as many as 57,000 Americans per year with paralytic disease.
- Without routine vaccination, infectious diseases can quickly return and cause widespread harm. Whooping cough rates have increased dramatically over the past thirty years, from a low of 1,000 cases to over 10,000 in 2008. According to a study published in the June 2009 edition of Pediatrics, children who are not immunized against whooping cough are 23 times more likely to contract the debilitating disease.
- Immunization has nearly eliminated a major cause of childhood meningitis, *Haemophilus influenzae* type b, everywhere the vaccine is used. Before the vaccine became available, 20,000 cases of the disease were reported and nearly 600 died each year in the United States. Unfortunately, cases of this deadly disease are resurfacing in the United States due to lower vaccination rates.
- Influenza continues to take the lives of more than 36,000 Americans each year. This can be prevented only through annual vaccination against this deadly disease.

Together, we can protect ourselves and each other from potentially deadly diseases. Please make sure you and your loved ones are immunized on time, every time. For more information about vaccines and immunization, we recommend that you talk to your health care provider, or local or state health agency.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Organization Supporters</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Albert B. Sabin Vaccine Institute</td>
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<td>America’s Health Insurance Plans</td>
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<td>American Academy of Pediatrics</td>
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<td>American College of Osteopathic Pediatricians</td>
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<td>American College of Preventive Medicine</td>
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<td>American Immunization Registry Association</td>
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<td>American Nurses Association</td>
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<td>American Pharmacists Association</td>
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<td>Association of Immunization Managers</td>
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<td>Association of State and Territorial Health Officials</td>
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<td>Autism Science Foundation</td>
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<td>Every Child By Two</td>
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<td>Immunization Action Coalition</td>
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<td>Infectious Diseases Society of America</td>
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<td>Pediatric Infectious Diseases Society</td>
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<td>Meningitis Angels</td>
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<td>National Association for the Education of Young Children</td>
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<td>National Meningitis Association</td>
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<td>Partnership for Prevention</td>
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<td>The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists</td>
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<td>The Immunization Partnership</td>
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<td>The March of Dimes Foundation</td>
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<td>Vaccine Education Center at The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia</td>
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<td>Chicago Area Immunization Campaign</td>
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<td>Grand Forks Public Health</td>
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<td>Immunization Coalition of Washington, DC</td>
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**Individual Supporters**

**Khizer Ahmad, MD**  
*Cherokee Pediatrics*  
*Canton, GA*

**Lindsey Albenberg, DO**  
*Chief Resident*  
*Children's Mercy Hospital*

**Nicole E. Alexander, MD**  
*Assistant Professor*  
*Adult-Pediatric Infectious Diseases*

**Jon R. Almquist, MD**  
*Clinical Professor of Pediatrics*  
*University of Washington*

**Sherman J. Alter, MD**  
*Department of Pediatrics*  
*Boonshoft School of Medicine*  
*Wright State University*  
*Division of Infectious Disease*  
*The Children's Medical Center of Dayton*

**Ramona K. Anderson**  
*Immunization Program Coordinator*  
*New Britain Health Department*  
*New Britain, CT*

**Jan Arsenault, RN, BC, BSN**  
*Field Rep*  
*Livingston County Health Department*  
*Micigan Department of Community Health Immunization*

**Dr. Noam H. Arzt**  
*President, HLN Consulting, LLC*  
*San Diego, CA*

**Judith A. Badner, MD, PhD**  
*Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry*  
*University of Chicago*

**M. Virginia Barrow, MD**  
*Residency Program Director*  
*Assistant Professor of Pediatrics*  
*University of California, Los Angeles*

**Renee Barth**  
*Practice Manager*  
*Bristol Pediatric Center*

**Erika Beard-Irvin, MD**

**Christy Beneri, DO**  
*Assistant Professor of Clinical Pediatrics*  
*Division of Infectious Diseases*  
*SUNY Stony Brook*

**John Billharz, MD**

**Wil Blechman, MD**  
*Former Florida State Health Officer*

**Joseph A. Bocchini, Jr, MD**  
*Professor and Chairman*  
*Department of Pediatrics*  
*Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center at Shreveport*

**Christina Brandon**  
*Manager, Quality Management*  
*Health Plan of Michigan*

**Denise Bratcher, DO**  
*Professor, Pediatrics*  
*Children’s Mercy Hospitals and Clinics*  
*Pediatric Infectious Diseases*

**Ryan Breuer, MD**

**Ari Brown, MD**  
*Pediatrician and Author of Baby 411*

**John B. Brown, MD**  
*Moscow Emergency Physicians*  
*Moscow, Idaho*
Kristina Bryant, MD  
Associate Professor of Pediatrics  
University of Louisville

Betty Bumpers  
Former First Lady of Arkansas  
Co-founder, Every Child By Two

Wendy Byers-Phillips, RN, BSN  
PH Supervisor  
District Health Dept. No. 4  
Alpena, MI

Tina M. Cairns, PhD  
University of Pennsylvania  
Department of Microbiology

Rosalynn Carter  
Former First Lady of U.S.A.  
Co-founder, Every Child By Two

Timothy Casias, MD  
Children's Mercy Hospital  
Kansas City, MO

Catherine Casey, MD  
Pediatrics Of Arlington  
Arlington, VA

Susana Chávez-Bueno, MD  
Pediatric Infectious Diseases specialist  
Oklahoma City, OK

Alan W. Clement, MD  
Pediatric Resident  
Children's Mercy Hospital  
Kansas City, MO

Steve Cochi, MD, MPH  
Senior Advisor  
Global Immunization Division, CDC

Ryan Coller, MD  
Chief Pediatric Resident  
UCLA School of Medicine

Heather Colombo, RN  
Public Health Nurse

Philip Cone  
Administrator  
East Hartford Medical Center

Susan R. Cooper, MSN, RN  
Commissioner  
Tennessee Department of Health  
Nashville, TN

Marilyn J. Crain, MPH, MD  
Associate Professor of Pediatrics,  
Division of Pediatric Infectious Diseases  
UAB School of Medicine

John Crankshaw, MD  
Internal Medicine/Pediatrics  
Family Physicians of Urbana, Inc  
Urbana, OH

Christina Dalton, DO  
Pediatric Resident, PGY-2  
Children’s Mercy Hospitals & Clinics  
Kansas City, MO

Greg Dean, MD  
Program Director  
Division of Pediatric Urology  
Temple University Children's Medical Center

Terence S. Dermody, MD  
Dorothy Overall Wells Professor of  
Pediatrics and Microbiology and  
Immunology  
Director, Division of Pediatric Infectious  
Diseases  
Director, Vanderbilt Medical Scientist  
Training Program  
Lamb Center for Pediatric Research  
Vanderbilt University School of Medicine

Jeffrey D. Dvorin, MD, PhD  
Fellow, Infectious Diseases  
Children’s Hospital Boston

Stephanie Esters, BSN, RN  
Provider Education/Outreach Nurse
Mary Ewing, RN  
Rumsey Hall School

Margaret E. Feeney, MD  
Assistant Professor  
The Ragon Institute of MGH, MIT, and Harvard

Sally Findley  
Professor of Clinical Population and Family Health  
Mailman School of Public Health  
Columbia University

Donna Fisher, MD  
Pediatric Infectious Diseases  
Assistant Professor of Pediatrics  
Tufts University School of Medicine  
Baystate Children’s Hospital

Kathy Fitton, RN  
I.C.H.D.  
Immunization Clinic  
Lansing, MI

Pat Flynn, MD  
Department of Infectious Diseases  
St. Jude Children's Research Hospital  
Memphis, TN

William H. Foege, MD, MPH  
Former Director  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

George Fogg, MD/PhD  
Pediatric Infectious Diseases  
Helen DeVos Children's Hospital

Patricia Fralick, RN, MBA  
Director of Family & Community Health  
Health Department of Northwest Michigan

Lawrence D. Frenkel, MD, FAAP, FPIDS, FACAAI  
Professor of Pediatrics and Microbiology,  
U of I C of Medicine at Rockford

Andrea Gay  
Executive Director, Children’s Health  
UN Foundation

Timothy Geen, MD  
Perfield Pediatrics

Anne Gershon, MD  
Professor of Pediatrics  
Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons

Terrell T. Gibbs, PhD  
Associate Professor  
Department of Pharmacology & Experimental Therapeutics  
Boston University School of Medicine

Dr. Jeffery A. Goad, Pharm.D., MPH, FCPhA, FCSHP  
Associate Professor  
Titus Family Department of Clinical Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Economics & Policy  
President, California Pharmacists Association

Stanley E. Grogg, DO  
Interim Dean/President  
Professor of Pediatrics  
Oklahoma State University Center for Health Sciences

Dan Hale, MD

Harriet Hall, MD  
Retired family physician; writer  
Editor of the Science-Based Medicine website

Michele Hansen  
AMTE

Nurul I Hariadi, MD  
3rd Year Resident  
UCLA Pediatric Residency Program
Jo-Ann S. Harris, MD

Bonita Harrison, MD
King Pediatric Clinic

Debra K. Hearington, MS, RN, PNP-BC
Clinical Assistant Professor
Virginia Commonwealth University School of Nursing

Tammy Hickman, BSN, CPNP
Clinician/Coordinator
Ironmen Health Center - A Safe and Caring Place for Youth Health Care
Mancelona, MI

Michele Hill, LPN
Early Head Start Nurse
Snyder/Union Counties
SUMCD

Edward Hoekstra, MD, MSc
Coordinator Global Measles Programme
UNICEF HQ, New York

Amanda Horn, MD
Pediatrics Resident Physician
Children's Mercy Hospital Kansas City
Missouri

Therese Hoyle, BSHE
Public Health Consultant
Hoyle Consulting Inc.
Delton, Michigan

John Huang, MD, MPH
Resident in Pediatrics
UCLA Medical Center

J. Renee Irvin, CMPE, CPC, CEMC, CHCC, CPMSM
Chief Executive Officer
HealthWise Medical Associates, LLP
Practice Management Advisors, Inc.

Ann Jacobsen, RN, BSN
Clinic Nurse Manager
Creighton Family HealthCare- Florence

Stephen M. Johnson, MD, DTM&H, FAAP, FIDSA
Pediatric Infectious Diseases
The Childrens Hospital at Legacy Emanuel
Portland, OR

Val Jones, MD
CEO, Better Health LLC

David Kaufman, MD
Associate Professor of Pediatrics
Assistant Medical Director, NICU
Neonatal Clinical Trials Group Director
ECMO/ELSO Medical Director
Division of Neonatology
Department of Pediatrics
University of Virginia Medical School

Steve Kohl, MD
Volunteer Faculty
Oregon Health and Sciences University
Professor Emeritus
University of California San Francisco

Jeffery P. Koplan, MD, MPH
Director
Emory Global Health Institute
Former Director, Center for Disease Control and Prevention

Mary Beth Koslap-Petraco DNP(c), CPNP
Coordinator - Child Health
Suffolk County Department of Health Services
Hauppauge, NY

Paul Krogstad, MD
Professor
Departments of Pediatrics and Molecular and Medical Pharmacology
David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA
Charles T. Leach, MD  
Professor of Pediatrics  
Division of Infectious Diseases & Immunology  
Department of Pediatrics  
UTHSC San Antonio

Karen Leamer, MD

Laura Le Dyner, MD  
Pediatric Infectious Disease Fellow  
Stanford University

Robert J. Leggiadro, MD  
Pediatric Infectious Diseases Society

Kathleen Leonard, MD

Carlos Lerner, MD, MPhil  
Medical Director, UCLA Children's Health Center  
Assistant Professor of Clinical Pediatrics, David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA

Tamara Lewis, MD, MPA, MPH  
Medical Director, Community Health and Prevention  
Intermountain Healthcare  
Salt Lake City, UT

Allan S. Lieberthal MD  
Kaiser Permanente  
Panorama City, CA

Irene Litwak  
Immunization Manager  
Danbury Visiting Nurse Association, Inc.

Jessica Lloyd, MD  
Pediatrician  
UCLA

Jorge Lujan-Zilbermann, MD  
Associate Professor of Pediatrics  
Division of Infectious Diseases  
University of South Florida College of Medicine

David Luoma, MD, MMM  
Family Medicine, Marquette, MI  
Member, Michigan Advisory Committee on Immunizations

Michael Madanat, MD  
UCLA Medical Center  
Department of Pediatrics  
PGY-3

K. Raza Mahmood, MD  
Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine  
Mountainside Pediatrics, Jasper, GA

Chitra S. Mani, MBBS, DCH, FAAP  
Professor  
Pediatric Infectious Diseases  
Hospital Epidemiologist  
Department of Pediatrics  
Medical College of Georgia

Edgar K. Marcuse, MD, MPH  
Professor, Pediatrics  
University of Washington  
Associate Medical Director  
Seattle Children’s and Regional Medical Center

Gary S. Marshall, MD  
Professor of Pediatrics  
Chief, Division of Pediatric Infectious Diseases  
University of Louisville School of Medicine  
Louisville, Kentucky

Angie Matthiessen, MSW  
Program Coordinator  
Immunize Georgia  
Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, Inc.

Elizabeth Meade, MD  
Pediatric Resident  
UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine

Robert A. Mendelson, MD, FAAP
Joshua Meyerson, MD, MPH  
**Medical Director**  
District Health Department #4 and  
Health Department of Northwest Michigan

Dianne L. McCagg, APRN, BC, MSN

Eric McGrath, MD  
Pediatric Infectious Disease Fellow  
Children's Hospital of Michigan

Suzanne L. McNulty, MD, FAAP  
Mission Viejo, CA  
Mia Bella Pediatrics

Shari Medford, MD  
Amarillo Children's Clinic

David Michalik, DO  
Assistant Clinical Professor of Pediatrics  
University of California at Irvine  
Division of Pediatric Infectious Diseases  
Miller Children’s Hospital

Kiran Mitha, MD  
Pediatric Resident, UCLA Mattel Children's Hospital

Cindy Modie, RN, BSN  
Consortium for Healthy & Immunized Communities, Inc.

Rosemary Moleski  
Pediatric Infectious Diseases Fellow, MD  
Boston Medical Center

Kelly L. Moore, MD, MPH  
Medical Director  
Tennessee Immunization Program

Maureen M. Moore  
Project Coordinator  
The Immunization Partnership  
Houston Area Immunization Partnership

Richard A. Moriarty, MD, FAAP  
**Professor of Clinical Pediatrics**  
Department of Pediatrics  
Division of Infectious disease and Immunology  
UMass Memorial Health Care

Sandra Moutsios, MD  
**Director, Med-Peds Residency Program**  
Vanderbilt University Medical Center

Audrey Muñoz, LVN, AAHA  
**Infant/Childhood Education & Outreach Supervisor**

Mary Murphy, MD  
North Coast Pediatrics

Sharon Nachman, MD  
**Associate Dean for Research**  
Professor of Pediatrics  
Dept. of Pediatrics  
HSC SUNY Stony Brook  
Stony Brook, NY

Karen O'Brien, BS Pharm, Pharm D  
**Assistant Professor, Department of Pharmacy Sciences**  
Creighton University  
School of Pharmacy and Health Professions

Linda K. Ohri, Pharm D, MPH  
**Associate Professor of Pharmacy Practice**  
Creighton University School of Pharmacy & Health Professions

Walter A. Orenstein, MD  
**Former Director**  
National Immunization Program  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Michael Packer, MD  
Temple Urology

Sheila L. Palevsky, MD, MPH
Maria Jevitz Patterson, MD, PhD  
Depts Microbiology/Molecular Genetics and Pediatrics  
Michigan State University

Georges Peter, MD  
Professor Emeritus of Pediatrics  
Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University  
Providence, RI

Timothy R. Peters, MD  
Assistant Professor of Pediatrics  
Wake Forest University

Elizabeth Peterson, MD  
Community Pediatrics

Jo Perkins  
Public Health Educator  
Madison County Department of Health

Stanley A. Plotkin, MD  

William Schaffner, MD  
Professor and Chair  
Department of Preventive Medicine  
Vanderbilt University School of Medicine

Emily C. Shelby, RN, BSN  
Immunization Nurse Educator  
Charles Drew Health Center  
Omaha, NE

Kristin Shore, BS  
KSWebIZ - Immunization Registry  
Kansan Department of Health and Environment

Heather Shull  
Immunization Coordinator  
Colorado Immunization Information System  
Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

Kathrin Sidell, MD, PhD

Boris Skurkovich, MD  
Clinical Associate Professor of Pediatrics  
Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University  
Dean, UNC School of Medicine  
CEO, UNC Health Care System

Edward P. Rothstein, MD  
Pennridge Pediatric Associates

Anne H. Rowley, MD  
Professor of Pediatrics and of Microbiology/Immunology  
Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, Pediatrics  
Chicago, IL

Kevin A. Slavin, MD, FAAP  
Pediatric Infectious Diseases  
Chief, Section of Quality and Safety  
Joseph M. Sanzari Children's Hospital  
Assistant Professor Pediatrics  
UMDNJ-New Jersey Medical School  
Hackensack University Medical Center

Martin H. Smith, MD  
Past President, American Academy of Pediatrics

Ta Tanisha Smith, MD  
Allegheny General Hospital
John Snyder, MD, FAAP  
Chief, Section of General Pediatrics  
Saint Vincents Hospital  
Assistant Professor of Pediatrics  
New York Medical College

Sunil K. Sood, MD  
Firm Director, Pediatric Unit,  
Chief, Pediatric Infectious Diseases  
Schneider Children's Hospital at North Shore  
Professor of Clinical Pediatrics  
Albert Einstein College of Medicine

Jennifer Stahl, MD, FAAP  
Mia Bella Pediatrics  
Mission Viejo, CA

Thomas E. Stenvig, RN, PhD, MPH,  
CNAA-BC  
Associate Professor  
South Dakota State University College of Nursing

Helen P. Stern, PHN  
Immunization Coordinator  
Warren County Public Health  
Lake George, NY

Patricia Stinchfield, RN, MS, CPNP  
Director  
Pediatric Infectious Disease & Immunology  
Infection Control  
Children's Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota

Robert T. Stone, MD  
Associate Chair for Community Affairs  
Children's Hospital Medical Center of Akron

Stephanie H. Stovall, MD  
Assistant Professor, Department of Pediatrics  
Division of Pediatric Infectious Disease  
University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences  
College of Medicine and  
Arkansas Children's Hospital

Jolanta Szczarkowska, MD

David T. Tayloe, Jr, MD, FAAP  
President, American Academy of Pediatrics

Jonathan L. Temte, MD, PhD  
Professor of Family Medicine  
University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health Madison, Wisconsin

Chris Thrash  
Med/Peds Resident  
UCLA Health System

Carol Timm, RN, BSN  
Community Outreach Coordinator  
Sarpy/Cass County Dept of Health and Wellness  
Papillion, NE

Monica M. Ulses, RN, BSN  
Public Health Nurse/Disease Investigations  
Sarpy/Cass Department of Health  
Papillion NE

Erika Van Dam, MPH  
Family and Community Health Supervisor  
Health Department of Northwest Michigan

Shayan Vyas, MD

Juan N. Walterspiel, MD, FAAP  
Pediatric Infectious Diseases

Geoffrey A. Weinberg, MD  
Professor of Pediatrics  
Director, Pediatric HIV Program  
Division of Pediatric Infectious Diseases  
University of Rochester School of Medicine & Dentistry

Melanie Wellington, MD, PhD  
Assistant Professor, Pediatric Infectious Diseases  
Golisano Children's Hospital at Strong  
University of Rochester Medical Center
Mark Welles, MD  
Schneider Children’s Hospital  
Peter N. Wenger, MD  
Associate Professor  
Departments of Preventive Medicine and Community Health/Pediatrics  
UMDNJ - New Jersey Medical  

Christopher B. White, MD  
Professor of Pediatrics  
Associate Dean for Faculty Development & Educational Achievement  
Director, Career Development & Education Center  
Medical College of Georgia  

Amy Wishner, MSN, RN  
Director, EPIC - Immunization; Curriculum Development, EPIC - Developmental Screening  
PA Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics (PA AAP)  

Helena Zarocostas Wong  
Immunization Action Program  
Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center  

Charles R. Woods, MD, MS  
Vice Chair for Faculty Development  
Professor of Pediatrics Infectious Diseases  
Department of Pediatrics University of Louisville School of Medicine