Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

November 19, 2026

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

Dr. Erica Schwartz
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's
1600 Clifton Road NE
Atlanta, Georgia 30333

Dear Secretary Kennedy and Dr. Erica Schwartz,

We write with deep concern regarding the dismantling of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Drowning Prevention Program and the termination of federal employees responsible for drowning surveillance, research, and prevention. Drowning remains a serious and preventable public health threat, particularly for children, yet the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has eliminated the federal team specifically charged with understanding and preventing these deaths.[1] We urge you to reconsider these actions, restore CDC's capacity to conduct this critical work, and provide answers to the questions outlined below regarding the future of federal drowning prevention efforts.

Congress established dedicated funding for drowning prevention at CDC in Fiscal Year 2022 and subsequently provided $2 million annually for this work.[2] The CDC was directed to use these funds to implement proven drowning-prevention programs with national organizations serving underserved and diverse youth, support state drowning-surveillance efforts, and help develop and implement a national water-safety plan.[3]

CDC's own data demonstrate the continued need for federal leadership in this space. More than 4,500 people died from drowning annually between 2020 and 2022—approximately 500 more deaths each year than in 2019. Drowning is the leading cause of death among children ages one through four and the second-leading cause of unintentional injury death among children ages five through fourteen.[4] The burden is also disproportionate: American Indian and Alaska Native people experienced the highest drowning rates from 2019 through 2022, followed by Black Americans, whose drowning death rate increased 28 percent in 2021 compared with 2019. CDC also estimated that approximately 40 million U.S. adults do not know how to swim and that 55 percent of U.S. adults have never taken a swimming lesson.[5]

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[1] Pien Huang, "Drowning Prevention Program Comes to a Halt at the CDC," *NPR*, Aug. 27, 2025, as republished by GBH, source

[2] U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations, *Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2022*, S. Rept. 117-84, at 88 (2021) (providing $2 million in new dedicated funding for CDC drowning prevention), report.

[3] U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations, *Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2025*, (continuing $2 million for drowning prevention and directing CDC to implement prevention programs, support state surveillance, and develop and implement a national water-safety plan), report.

[4] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Drowning Data," National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, reviewed Jan. 27, 2026, CDC Drowning Data

[5] Tessa Clemens et al., "Vital Signs: Drowning Death Rates, Self-Reported Swimming Skill, Swimming Lesson Participation, and Recreational Water Exposure—United States, 2019–2023," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, vol. 73, no. 20, May 23, 2024, pp. 467–473, CDC MMWR

CDC itself states that its role in drowning prevention includes collecting data to identify trends and populations at greatest risk, evaluating prevention strategies, and piloting water-safety programs with community partners.[5] This work has included partnerships with organizations such as the YMCA and other water-safety organizations to expand swimming and water-safety education, particularly for communities at increased risk.[6] The CDC Foundation has similarly supported efforts to strengthen drowning surveillance, advance research, and improve understanding of drowning risks to inform effective prevention strategies.

CDC also continues to recognize the U.S. National Water Safety Action Plan as a 10-year, evidence-informed roadmap for reducing drowning nationwide.[7] Eliminating the federal personnel responsible for this work raises serious questions about who is now responsible for carrying out these functions and whether congressionally directed drowning-prevention activities are continuing.

The need for timely federal drowning surveillance is particularly urgent as the nation emerges from the summer months, when drowning deaths are most prevalent. CDC data demonstrates that fatal drownings peak during warmer months, when recreational water activities increase.[8] As the summer of 2026 concludes, the elimination of dedicated federal drowning-prevention staff raises serious concerns about CDC's ability to collect, analyze, and publish timely drowning data from this summer and future seasons. Without the federal staff and expertise necessary to maintain these surveillance functions, policymakers, researchers, and community organizations risk losing access to critical information needed to identify emerging trends, evaluate prevention efforts, and respond to populations at greatest risk. Delays or gaps in federal surveillance could undermine the nation's ability to develop effective interventions before the next peak drowning season.

Despite this congressional directive, on April 1, 2025, through reductions in force HHS effectively eliminated CDC's Drowning Prevention Program.[9] More than 200 employees within CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control were terminated, including employees responsible for drowning prevention. The remaining drowning-prevention experts were reportedly placed on administrative leave in April and terminated in August 2025.[1] A June 2026 report from the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform similarly found that the reductions in force "essentially eliminating the Drowning Prevention Program," despite congressional funding and direction for the program.[4]

Eliminating the federal personnel responsible for this work raises serious questions about who is now responsible for carrying out CDC's drowning-prevention functions, whether congressionally directed activities are continuing, and whether the agency retains sufficient capacity to provide timely and comprehensive drowning surveillance data. These concerns are especially troubling given the disproportionate impact of drowning on children and historically underserved communities, whose safety depends on sustained investment in accessible water-safety education and evidence-based prevention efforts.

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[6] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "The YMCA," National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, updated Sept. 15, 2025 (describing CDC's support for evaluating the YMCA Safety Around Water program and grants to community organizations), CDC YMCA Partnership.

[7] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "U.S. National Water Safety Action Plan," National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, July 28, 2025, CDC National Water Safety Action Plan.

[8] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Drowning Prevention." CDC, https://www.cdc.gov/drowning/data-research/index.html

[9] U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Democratic Staff, June 23, 2026, at page 85 (finding that April 1, 2025 reductions in force "essentially eliminat[ed] the Drowning Prevention Program"), report

Given these concerns, we request that HHS restore CDC's Drowning Prevention Program and the federal expertise necessary to carry out its surveillance, research, and prevention responsibilities. We also request your response to the following questions by November 27th:

1. How many CDC employees working primarily or substantially on drowning prevention were terminated, placed on administrative leave, reassigned, or otherwise affected by reductions in force since January 20, 2025?
2. Which office and personnel are currently responsible for CDC's drowning surveillance, research, prevention, and public-education activities, and how many full-time equivalent employees are assigned to this work?
3. How has HHS obligated or expended funds appropriated by Congress for CDC drowning prevention since Fiscal Year 2025, and have any such funds been withheld, redirected, or left unobligated?
4. What is the status of drowning-prevention research, state surveillance support, community partnerships, and other projects that were underway before the April 2025 reductions in force, including work intended to identify populations at greatest risk and evaluate effective prevention strategies?
5. What steps will HHS and CDC take to ensure the federal government maintains the personnel, expertise, and resources necessary to conduct drowning surveillance and prevention, regularly analyze and publish national drowning data, support state and local surveillance efforts, evaluate evidence-based interventions, and provide timely water-safety guidance to the public?

Drowning can happen in seconds, but the federal government's responsibility to prevent avoidable deaths cannot disappear just as quickly. We urge you to restore CDC's capacity to provide the data, expertise, and evidence-based prevention efforts that families and communities across the country depend upon.

We look forward to your prompt response.

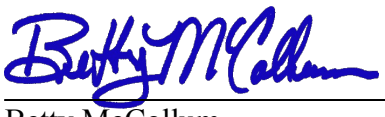
Sincerely,

Nikema Williams
Member of Congress

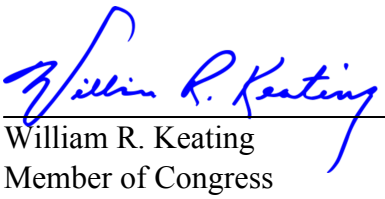
Gabe Amo
Member of Congress

Debbie Wasserman Schultz
Member of Congress

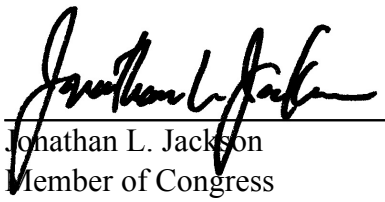
Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



Betty McCollum
Member of Congress



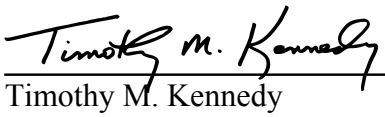
William R. Keating
Member of Congress



Jonathan L. Jackson
Member of Congress



Shontel M. Brown
Member of Congress



Timothy M. Kennedy
Member of Congress



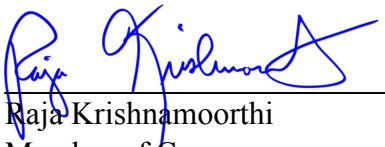
Adelita S. Grijalva
Member of Congress



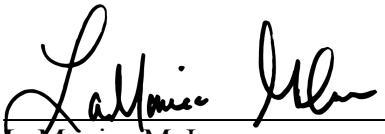
Ilhan Omar
Member of Congress



Val Hoyle
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Raja Krishnamoorthi
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LaMonica McIver
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Maxwell Alejandro Frost
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