

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 22, 2016

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Committee on Health, Education, Labor &
Pensions
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education, Labor &
Pensions
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

As you begin considering legislation in the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions aimed at advancing medical innovations, we respectfully request that you consider marking up the Lyme and Tick-Borne Disease Prevention, Education, and Research Act of 2015 (S. 1503). This bipartisan bill takes important steps to combat tick-borne diseases, which remain a significant public health threat in states across the country.

Now more than ever, Lyme disease and other tick-borne illnesses represent dangers to public health. Lyme disease is the most commonly reported vector borne illness in the United States.¹ In 2014, Lyme disease was the fifth most common nationally notifiable disease and 96 percent of reported cases occurred in 14 states.² In 1993, 69 counties in the United States had sufficient reported cases of Lyme disease to qualify as high risk. By 2012, the number of high risk counties had quadrupled.³ Recently, researchers at the Mayo Clinic found that a new species of bacteria, *Borrelia mayonii*, is able to cause Lyme disease.⁴ The new species has thus far been found in the upper Midwest and is likely transmitted to humans by the bite of an infected deer tick.⁵ In addition to Lyme disease, there are 13 tick-borne diseases spread by 9 species of tick in the United States, with North Carolina, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee and Missouri having the highest number of reported cases. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (CDC) there were over 36,000 confirmed or probable Lyme disease cases in 2013. The CDC has estimated that the total number of people diagnosed with Lyme disease each year is actually about 10 times higher than the number of reported cases.

The increased number of cases further underscores the need for legislation to address Lyme disease and other tick-borne illnesses. The Lyme and Tick Borne Disease Prevention, Education and Research Act would create an advisory committee within the Department of

¹ Lyme Disease, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (Sep. 24, 2015), <http://www.cdc.gov/lyme/stats/index.html>.

² *Id.*

³ Geographic Distribution and Expansion of Human Lyme Disease, United States, Emerging Infectious Diseases, Vol. 21, No. 8 (Aug. 2015), http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/21/8/14-1878_article.

⁴ New Lyme-disease-causing bacteria species discovered, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), (Feb. 8, 2016), <http://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2016/p0208-lyme-disease.html>.

⁵ *Id.*

Health and Human Services that would be tasked with identifying best practices to combat Lyme disease and other tick-borne illnesses. The group would be focused on bringing together patients, advocates, researchers, medical professionals, and government officials to ensure that the United States takes a coordinated approach to responding to Lyme and other tick-borne illnesses, addresses the complicated health challenges these diseases present, and remains committed to public involvement and engagement in federal activities to combat Lyme and other tick-borne diseases. The legislation requires that the Committee include at least two patient representatives and at least one physician involved in direct patient care with experience treating Lyme disease and other tick-borne illnesses.

The Lyme and Tick-Borne Disease Prevention, Education, and Research Act would also require certain actions on the part of the HHS Secretary to combat Lyme disease and other tick-borne diseases. Specifically, the Secretary (in consultation with the Advisory Committee) would be required to coordinate efforts to strengthen disease surveillance and reporting, develop better diagnostic tools and tests to detect Lyme disease, create a physician-education program, establish epidemiological research objectives for Lyme and other tick-borne illnesses, and prepare regular reports to Congress on the progress of efforts to combat these devastating diseases.

The rapid rise in active Lyme and other tick-borne disease cases over the past decade demands a strong and coordinated effort at the federal level to address the public health threat to our nation. Our bill has earned the support of a total of 15 Senators from both parties, including 5 members of the HELP Committee. We urge you to consider inclusion of the Lyme and Tick-Borne Disease Prevention, Education, and Research Act as you begin marking up legislation that advances medical innovation. Thank you for the consideration of this request.

Sincerely,



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Kelly Ayotte
United States Senator



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator