

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

April 22, 2025

Susan Monarez, PhD
Acting Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30329

Dear Acting Director Monarez,

We are extremely alarmed by reports that all full-time employees of the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) Vessel Sanitation Program (VSP) have been terminated.¹ As news of the worst outbreak aboard a cruise ship this year is making headlines, it is incomprehensible that the officials responsible for protecting the health of the cruise-going public would be abruptly terminated.²

The VSP is a vital program that works to prevent, control, and publicize public health incidents aboard cruise ships.³ Through routine inspections, training of cruise ship personnel, and responses to and documentation of outbreaks aboard cruise ships, the VSP protects and promotes public health for cruise-goers everywhere.⁴ Among its most important functions are VSP's maintenance of databases of outbreaks in its jurisdiction and inspection scores for cruise ships.⁵ This critical information helps the traveling public make informed decisions before they sail. It is therefore confounding that the VSP has been swept up in the indiscriminate cuts that were initiated recently at the CDC. According to reports, the CDC's Division of Environmental Health Science and Practice, which housed the VSP, was decimated by staff losses.⁶

Elimination of the VSP is especially concerning now, when just last month a massive norovirus outbreak was reported on a luxury cruise liner travelling from England to the Caribbean.⁷ This outbreak aboard the Queen Mary 2 sickened 224 passengers and 17 crew members.⁸ And indeed, while this is the most widespread cruise ship outbreak so far this year, it

¹ Alexander Tin, "CDC's Cruise Ship Inspectors Laid Off Amid Bad Year for Outbreaks," CBS News, April 10, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cdc-cruise-ship-inspectors-layoffs-outbreaks-norovirus/>.

² Christine Hauser, "More than 230 People Infected with Norovirus on Luxury Cruise Ship," *New York Times*, (New York City, New York), April 1, 2025.

³ "About Vessel Sanitation Program," CDC.gov, last modified May 29, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/vessel-sanitation/about/index.html>.

⁴ "About Vessel Sanitation Program."

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Alisha Dos Santos, "CDC Layoffs Signal Bad News for Cruise Passengers," *The Street*, April 5, 2025, <https://www.thestreet.com/travel/cdc-layoffs-signal-bad-news-for-cruise-passengers>.

⁷ Hauser, "More than 230 People Infected with Norovirus on Luxury Cruise Ship."

⁸ Ibid.

is far from the first. According to the database maintained by the VSP, there have already been thirteen confirmed outbreaks aboard cruise ships in the first three months of 2025, sickening almost 1,400 people this year alone.⁹


As we saw with the rampant spread of COVID-19 aboard cruise ships in the early days of the pandemic, these environments provide a prime opportunity for the transmission of disease. That is why it is absolutely critical that the CDC maintains the office and staff responsible for dealing with outbreaks on cruise ships. Severely reducing or eliminating the program that holds CDC's subject matter expertise on this issue is short-sighted, and will ultimately lead to more illnesses.

It is therefore critical to understand CDC's plan to continue its vital cruise ship monitoring efforts, in the absence of the VSP. To that end, we request answers to the following questions by May 6, 2025:

1. Please describe what plans, if any, the CDC has for eliminating the VSP.
 - a. Please describe what metrics, if any, were used when evaluating the potential elimination of the VSP.
2. Please describe how the CDC intends to fulfill its statutory obligations to protect public health aboard cruise ships in the absence of the VSP.
3. How many employees working for the VSP have left since January 20, 2025? Please include employees who accepted a deferred resignation offer, had their employment terminated, or were placed on administrative leave.
4. Will CDC continue to update its inspection scores database so the travelling public can make informed decisions when planning a cruise?
5. Will CDC continue to update its database of outbreaks to ensure the public has access to critical public health information about illnesses on cruise ships?

We appreciate your attention to this matter and look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,


RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senate


DORIS MATSUI
Member of Congress

⁹ "Outbreaks on Cruise Ships in VSP's Jurisdiction," CDC.gov, last modified April 18, 2025, <https://www.cdc.gov/vessel-sanitation/cruise-ship-outbreaks/index.html>.