

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 18, 2021

Mark Zuckerberg
Chief Executive Officer
Facebook
1 Hacker Way
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg,

I write with alarm about harassment on Facebook and Instagram of expectant mothers and women that have suffered miscarriages by groups and accounts promoting conspiracy theories and disinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine. Facebook must be willing to meet its commitments to stop health misinformation with forceful and effective action, and I write to request information about what steps it has taken to stop this horrific and destructive abuse.

According to heart-breaking stories documented by *The Daily Beast*, mothers that have posted on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter about receiving the COVID-19 vaccine have been flooded with abuse and harassed by strangers from ‘antivax’ circles.¹ For example, when Candice Cody, an anesthesiologist and former *Survivor* contestant, tweeted in December about being vaccinated while pregnant – encouraging mothers not to be afraid – she was inundated with obscene messages and false information across platforms. Compounding a profound tragedy, these abusive accounts have singled out women who have endured miscarriages, despicably blaming them for the loss, and wrongly linking them to their vaccination.

Such disinformation is clearly coordinated, often through private groups and public pages that scour social media for targets and anecdotes for feeding their campaign. One Instagram account, in operation since December with over 100,000 followers, continues to promote misinformation and misleading anecdotes about vaccine safety and the effectiveness of facemasks. These accounts and groups, on both Facebook and Twitter, have also become a launching point for swarms of believers to prey on mothers to create fear, uncertainty, and doubt. Despite a clear pattern of violating platform policies, these accounts are still active, with large numbers of followers and are easily findable.

¹ Emily Shugerman, “Anti-Vaxers Wage Cruel War on Pregnant Women who get COVID Shot,” *Daily Beast*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/anti-vaxxers-wage-cruel-war-on-pregnant-women-who-get-covid-shot>.

Time and again, Facebook and its peers have moved far too slow in responding to the targeted harassment and promotion of destructive conspiracy theories against women and people of color. These mothers, through raising awareness to the vaccine and setting an example for the community, are doing an immense public service and lovingly protecting their infants. They are also acting responsibly: there is no evidence that any COVID-19 vaccine is unsafe for pregnant women and mothers, and, according to Dr. Anthony Fauci, at least 20,000 pregnant women have been vaccinated without complication.² On the other hand, there is immense evidence that pregnant women are at an increased risk for severe illness or death due to COVID-19.³

Health officials across the country are vigilantly working to reassure the public that vaccines are safe and to achieve widespread immunity to save lives. Each piece of misinformation, each person bullied for doing the right thing, is a setback in our effort to end this costly pandemic. I welcome Facebook's February 8th announcement that it was "expanding the list of false claims we will remove to include additional debunked claims about COVID-19 and vaccines," including false claims that vaccines are toxic or dangerous.⁴ However, if Facebook fails to follow through on these policies with real enforcement, then these destructive campaigns of disinformation will continue – with catastrophic costs for children's lives and to public health.

Given the urgency of the vaccination efforts, I respectfully request answers to the following questions by February 28th:

- 1.) What specific steps has Facebook taken to enforce its policies against 'antivax' groups, content, and accounts since its announcement that it would remove false claims about COVID-19 vaccines, including the removal or demotion of groups and accounts?
- 2.) Does Facebook consider the harassment and singling out with disinformation against expectant mothers and women that have suffered a miscarriage to be a violation of its terms of service?
- 3.) What enforcement actions does Facebook intend to take against accounts and groups involved in campaigns of abuse against these women? Does Facebook ban those accounts that have engaged in such harassment, or does it allow for multiple infractions before shutting down these accounts?
- 4.) Why has Facebook failed to remove accounts identified by *The Daily Beast* as singling out and preying on women who have been vaccinated?

² "Fauci: 20,000 pregnant women have had COVID vaccine without complications," *Axios*, February 11, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/fauci-pregnant-women-covid-19-vaccine-39c9e299-b14c-4d7d-9e9d-1b7444251302.html>.

³ Centers for Disease Control, "Pregnancy, Breastfeeding, and Caring for Newborns," <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/pregnancy-breastfeeding.html> (accessed February 18, 2021).

⁴ Guy Rosen, "An Update on Our Work to Keep People Informed and Limit Misinformation About COVID-19," *Facebook*, February 8, 2021, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/04/covid-19-misinfo-update/#removing-more-false-claims>.

- 5.) How does Facebook enforce its COVID-19 policies against accounts that focus on creating ‘vaccine hesitancy,’ such as those systemically cherry picking or distorting information, or exploiting anecdotal cases to deter vaccinations?
- 6.) What steps is Facebook taking to proactively find private Facebook Groups and identify key accounts used to coordinate disinformation about COVID-19 and vaccines?

Thank you for your attention to these important issues. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Richard Blumenthal". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senate