

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-2107

December 21, 2021

Governor Charlie Baker
Massachusetts State House
Office of the Governor, Room 280
24 Beacon Street
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Governor Baker,

I write to urge you to take immediate action to mitigate the ongoing spread of the coronavirus in Massachusetts. The Commonwealth has reached the grim milestone of more than one million cases and nearly 20,000 deaths. Communities in my district—the Massachusetts 7th Congressional District—continue to be disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and the economic crisis that it has wrought. As we continue to experience a winter surge and are now faced with the new threat of the even more contagious Omicron variant, it is incumbent upon policymakers, at all levels of government, to act aggressively to center the public health and keep our collective constituents safe and healthy.

Our communities need a data-driven and holistic statewide plan to combat this ongoing pandemic and save lives. While your Administration's recent announcement to disburse more than 2 million at-home COVID-19 tests for high-need communities is a welcome first step, public health experts have warned that testing alone is simply not enough. The Commonwealth can and must do more to ensure our most vulnerable communities are protected. Yesterday, Mayor Wu along with several municipal leaders across the Greater Boston region, announced lifesaving measures to keep our residents safe. Last week, several of my colleagues in the State Legislature, led by State Senator Rausch, called on you to consider implementing a Massachusetts COVID-19 Action Plan,¹ a comprehensive and data informed strategy prepared by epidemiologists, public health experts, providers and frontline community leaders. I call on your Administration to seriously consider the various recommendations outlined in the Massachusetts COVID-19 Action Plan and advance a rigorous and comprehensive statewide COVID-19 response effort to mitigate the spread of this virus and save lives. I stand in solidarity with the experts and community leaders who worked collectively to put together this lifesaving framework and have taken measures to protect the most vulnerable in our communities.

As the experts rightfully point out, it is critical that any comprehensive statewide plan include the reinstatement of a statewide universal indoor mask policy. Public health experts note that masks remain simple and effective tools for limiting COVID-19 spread—especially as we navigate the winter months and traditional cold and flu seasons. Your Administration has recognized this fact

¹ "COVID-19 Action Plan: Working Together in Massachusetts Against the Winter COVID-19 Surge and Omicron Variant," Julia Koehler, MD, Regina LaRocque, MD, Julia Raifman, ScD, December 15, 2021, https://www.beccaraushma.com/files/ugd/edd3ca_f86c1fee87a94cfcbb549c5cadb13ef.pdf

by continuing the indoor mask policies in high-risk settings like hospitals and congregate settings. While I appreciate your heeding our calls earlier this year to implement a universal mask policy in schools, this policy is set to expire in January, just as many of our students and educators return from the holiday break. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), every county across the entire Commonwealth is experiencing high rates of transmission² and experts warn³ that the upcoming holiday gatherings and travel will likely exacerbate these spikes. Furthermore, initial data and analysis from the CDC show that the newly mutated Omicron variant is more contagious and could spread more quickly than the original COVID-19 virus. It is clear, implementing a universal indoor mask policy now can help mitigate these spikes and help save lives.

In addition to a statewide universal indoor mask policy, the Commonwealth must provide robust and consistent support to local and community-led efforts to increase vaccination and booster rates among vulnerable communities and increase access to free, high-quality rapid tests. While the Commonwealth as a whole continues to have a high vaccination rate, we continue to see disparities, particularly among eligible young people⁴. The city of Chelsea, one of the hardest hit communities early in the pandemic, has led with some of the highest vaccination rates for teenagers and adults⁵, and serves as an example of the success that can come from supporting community-led, culturally responsive, person-to-person vaccination efforts like those led by La Colaborativa. The Commonwealth can and must support locally embedded efforts to boost vaccination rates for adults and eligible children alike, such as mobile vaccination clinics and partnerships with community health centers, improve access to free and accessible high-quality testing and dispel any fear and misinformation that remains a barrier in our most vulnerable communities.

The Commonwealth must also take greater action to prevent COVID-19 spread among our frontline workers and our most vulnerable neighbors. Robust safety standards, proper ventilation, ample masking and appropriate distancing protocols are key to keeping workers safe and healthy in the workplace. While we continue to see spikes across the Commonwealth and continue to do the work necessary to adequately vaccinate our young people, it is critical to provide ongoing and robust support to our educators, students and their families. I urge your Administration to support school districts by providing robust and dedicated resources for testing and contact tracing as well as school-based vaccination clinics that are accessible and open to family members and caregivers. To ensure that school settings remain safe, I urge you to extend the

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, COVID-19 Integrated County View, December 20, 2021, https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view&list_select_state=Massachusetts&list_select_map_data_parent=Risk&map-metrics-cv-comm-transmission=community_transmission_level

³ WBUR, “Infectious Disease Expert Says to Expect Another COVID Surge in Mass. As Holidays Approach,” Rupa Shenoy and Dan Guzman, December 6, 2021, <https://www.wbur.org/news/2021/12/06/coronavirus-omicron-holiday-risk-massachusetts-cases>

⁴ The Boston Globe, “This is Very Problematic. Racial, Income Disparities Leave High Numbers of Young Children Unvaccinated Amid Race Against Omicron Variant,” Kay Lazar, November 30, 2021, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/11/30/metro/amid-race-against-omicron-rising-concern-youngest-hard-hit-neighborhoods/>

⁵ MassLive, “New COVID Vaccination Data Show Disparities Among Massachusetts Youth, Though Chelsea Community is an Outlier,” Kate Lannan, November 24, 2021, <https://www.masslive.com/coronavirus/2021/11/new-covid-vaccination-data-show-racial-disparities-among-massachusetts-youth-though-chelsea-is-an-outlier.html>

universal mask policy in school settings and ensure that educators and students have access to high-quality masks, PPE and other necessary materials to remain safe. As schools work to respond to COVID-19 cases as quickly as possible, it is critical that your Administration provide flexibilities to allow for remote learning options when necessary and advised by public health experts so schools are able to quickly respond to major outbreaks and so that students who have become ill or may have been exposed to COVID-19 are not at risk of falling behind.

In order to continue monitoring the ongoing crisis, the Commonwealth should continue to frequently publish comprehensive, disaggregated data on vaccination rates and COVID-19 infection, including breakthrough cases, across the state, especially in congregate settings like seniors' facilities and prisons. This ongoing and frequently published data will help us target resources to hardest-hit communities and allow us to respond to outbreaks in real time.

In this moment, our shared constituents deserve bold leadership and evidence-based policies that will mitigate COVID-19 transmission and save lives. I strongly urge you to heed the calls of the public health experts and the hundreds of community-based organizations that have informed the COVID-19 Action Plan and enact a statewide plan that will keep our families and communities safe. I stand ready to partner in any way necessary to ensure our most vulnerable communities are able to access the lifesaving resources and vaccinations necessary to combat this unprecedented pandemic.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ayanna S. Pressley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the beginning and a distinct "P" at the end.

Ayanna Pressley
Member of Congress