Statement on the Importance of Routine Vaccination
from AIM Executive Director Claire Hannan

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show a sharp drop in vaccine orders across the country during the months of January through April. The decline in routine vaccinations raises concern for two reasons: the drop in coverage rates increases vulnerability to disease outbreaks—putting our children at risk—and the lack of routine care at pediatrician offices could erode our healthcare infrastructure in the long term.

The drop in routine vaccination is not unexpected given the threat of COVID-19 and resulting stay-at-home orders. Parents are choosing to keep their healthy children at home. But it’s reassuring that CDC and state and local public health agencies are closely monitoring vaccine uptake and have picked up on this concerning trend in time to allow for corrective action.

Parents need reassurance that routine vaccination is safe and essential. Public health and private providers are working together to provide this reassurance. Providers are adapting to social distancing guidance and creating safe environments for care, such as curbside vaccinations, separate well-child hours, and telehealth to treat illness. Public health entities are working with state chapters of the American Academy of Pediatrics, local coalitions, businesses, and others to get the word out to parents that vaccinations are essential. If a child is due for a vaccine, parents should not cancel; they should call their provider. Public health and providers are also working to implement reminder/recall activities to get kids who have missed vaccines caught up.

History tells us that too much delay can put communities at risk. When health systems are overwhelmed, deaths from vaccine-preventable and treatable conditions can also increase dramatically. For example, during the 2014-2015 Ebola outbreak, deaths caused by measles, malaria, HIV, and tuberculosis exceeded deaths from Ebola. These deaths were attributable to health system failures.

Although we need to remain vigilant, we’ve had high coverage rates and low disease rates for many years for a reason: we have strong systems in place to ensure on-time vaccination of children aged 0-18, including the federal Vaccines for Children program. We know what to do to catch these kids up and we have experience doing it.

What might be new for us is the longer-term impact on pediatricians and our ability to maintain access to health care and vaccinations in rural communities and other underserved areas. Pediatricians are the backbone of our successful immunization infrastructure and they can’t survive without funds to pay staff and rent. We need to do everything we can to support all providers—both public and private—through this unprecedented time. Investment in our primary care network—public health, private providers, and the Vaccines for Children program—is critical.

As we work to reopen our economies, we need to continue to emphasize the importance of routine vaccination and preventive care. Our ability to prevent outbreaks in the short term and maintain strong primary health care and immunization infrastructure in the long term depends on it.
The Association of Immunization Managers (AIM) is a nonprofit membership association which supports the nation’s 64 federally-funded state, territorial, and local public health immunization programs. AIM works to enable immunization managers to work together to effectively prevent and control vaccine-preventable diseases and improve immunization coverage in the United States and its territories. Learn more at www.immunizationmanagers.org.