



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20460

May 6, 2020

THE ADMINISTRATOR

Deanna Scher, Ph.D.
Chair, Children's Health Protection Advisory Committee
Minnesota Department of Health
P.O. Box 64975
St. Paul, Minnesota 55164-0975

Dear Dr. Scher:

Thank you for accepting the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's nomination as Chair of the Children's Health Protection Advisory Committee. I am responding to CHPAC's March 8, 2020, letter with recommendations from working group members on how the EPA can better leverage risk communication practices to address and improve children's environmental health outcomes.

We recognize the depth of CHPAC's expertise on issues relating to the environmental health risks children face and appreciate the committee's many suggestions and comments. This letter comes at an important time, as the EPA is actively pursuing an effort to institutionalize the importance of scientific best practices into agencywide risk communication processes. CHPAC's recommendations are especially important to our efforts to build risk communication tools that reach all agency programs and regions.

Risk communication goes to the heart of the EPA's mission of protecting public health and the environment and is one of my top priorities as Administrator. It is critical for the EPA to speak with one voice when providing accurate environmental health information to the American public. Below, we have outlined how the EPA's current work and priorities align with CHPAC's recommendations and identify ongoing opportunities to continue to improve how the agency's risk communications approach meets the needs of America's children.

As indicated in CHPAC's letter, children are a uniquely vulnerable population due to their physiology and the sensitivities of development and behaviors that can increase their exposures. They are also unique because in most cases, risk communication reaches children through adults, whether they are parents, teachers or pediatric nurses. For this reason, as you have made clear, it will be very important for the EPA to continue to develop ongoing partnerships with these gate keepers. For example, the Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Unit network remains an essential partner to reach children and their caregivers with understandable, meaningful and actionable risk communication.

The need for quality and consistency in our risk communication approach cuts across all EPA programs, offices and regions. Improving agencywide risk communication requires more than a short-term fix; it will take a long-term investment and change in our current practice. In 2019, the EPA stood up a cross-agency Risk Communication Working Group to identify and review ongoing risk communication processes and approaches and to improve coordination not only across the agency, but also between the EPA and other federal partners and governmental stakeholders. This working group includes communication staff from agencywide program and regional offices who bring unique programmatic perspective to the EPA's overall risk communication efforts.

After an extensive search, Madeline Beal, MPH, joined the agency in November 2019 as an EPA senior risk communication advisor. She will lead the coordination of agencywide risk communication efforts and work to improve the consistency of our approach for both planned and emergency communication needs. Her work will include, but is not limited to, developing risk communication toolkits on emerging and cross-cutting contaminants; standing up an overall risk communication training program for EPA staff; coordinating across the EPA's regions, programs and offices through the EPA Risk Communication Working Group; and implementing a science-driven approach built on proven best practices. An additional goal of her work is to include strategic communication approaches to ensure that risk communication at the EPA continues to improve over time.

The EPA's Office of Children's Health Protection plays a critical role at the agency in protecting children's environmental health and will maintain a critical partnership role on agencywide efforts to address children's environmental health risk communication needs. OCHP will coordinate closely with Ms. Beal on implementation of the agencywide risk communications approach and will sit on the Risk Communication Working Group – consistent with all other EPA program and regional offices – to ensure that our risk communication processes and practices meet the unique needs of children.

Both the *Federal Action Plan to Reduce Childhood Lead Exposure and Associated Health Impacts* (Lead Action Plan) and *EPA's PFAS Action Plan* include discussions of the importance of effective risk communication. The EPA continues to play a leadership role on these topics and will consider the connections between the unique vulnerabilities of children, these contaminants and children's risk communication needs. Specifically, as part of the *President's Task Force on Environmental Health Risks and Safety Risks to Children*, the EPA is currently co-chairing a communications workgroup to implement the communications actions described in the Lead Action Plan. In line with CHPAC's recommendations, we hope the work of the task force, which includes representatives from across the federal government, will help inform the EPA's risk communication work, not only for the Lead Action Plan, but broadly.

CHPAC noted the importance of using consistent and culturally appropriate materials to reach parents, teachers and health practitioners who have a role in keeping children safe. Aligned with CHPAC's recommendation to develop and apply multi-faceted strategies for delivering risk communication, the EPA will develop tools and strategies that match accessibility, language, literacy and numeracy of the agency's target audiences.

A recent example of our efforts to meet children and their caregivers where they are with messaging that matches the needs of the audience was the EPA's October 2019 announcement of a Memorandum of Understanding to further support efforts that reduce lead in drinking water at schools and childcare facilities. The commitments made in this MOU will provide safer and healthier environments for children across the country. This new MOU provides the framework for a coordinated approach between more than a dozen critical partners across the federal government, tribes, water utilities and the public health community, further supporting the EPA's *3Ts: Training, Testing and Taking Action for Reducing Lead in Drinking Water in School and Child Care Facilities*. The 3Ts materials and outreach are good examples of the agency's commitment to develop risk communication materials that address the unique needs of children's environmental health.

I want to thank the working group's diligence and tremendous effort to identify results-oriented risk communication approaches to improve outcomes for children and for highlighting effective risk communication strategies. This advice is invaluable as we continue our long-term commitment to improving risk communication practices at the EPA. We look forward to working with CHPAC on risk communication and other issues going forward and hope to provide an update on the EPA's risk communication efforts to CHPAC in the upcoming year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andrew R. Wheeler", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Andrew R. Wheeler

cc: Mandy Gunasekara, Chief of Staff
Wesley Carpenter, Acting Deputy Chief of Staff
Amanda Kasper, Special Advisor to the Administrator
Madeline Beal, Senior Risk Communication Advisor
Nancy Grantham, Principal Deputy Assistant Administrator, Office of Public Affairs
Jeanne Briskin, Director, Office of Children's Health Protection