

May 12, 2025

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.
Secretary
Department of Health & Human Services (HHS)
200 Independence Ave SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dr. Susan Monarez
Acting Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30329

Re: Call to Restore the Division of Environmental Health Science and Practice, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Dear Secretary Kennedy and Dr. Monarez,

The undersigned groups call on you to immediately reinstate and fund the Division of Environmental Health Science and Practice (DEHSP)ⁱ at CDC, which was eliminated on April 1st of this year as part of a widespread reduction in force of 10,000 employees across HHS. This division protects the American public from exposure to environmental health hazards, including toxic contaminants in food and water, infectious disease outbreaks in restaurants and on cruise ships, air pollution, radiation and chemical weapons exposures, mold, and other outbreaks caused by toxic substances. All the civil servants within this division were fired on April 1st, and the division has not yet been restored.

Secretary Kennedy has pledged to clean up our food supply and Make America Healthy Again (MAHA), and has announced plans to investigate children's exposure to toxic materials through a MAHA Commission.ⁱⁱ Lead poisoning, or elevated blood lead levels, is a leading source of toxic exposure for children in the United States, affecting an estimated 500,000 U.S. children per year. Children are also more susceptible to harm from other environmental hazards, including infectious diseases. Preventing such exposures therefore should be a core focus of efforts to protect U.S. children.

The eliminated division is critical to that effort because it helps states solve outbreaks and prevent exposure to environmental health threats. Among other work, this division houses the CDC team that helped to solve a nationwide lead poisoning outbreak in children caused by imported cinnamon applesauce that had been intentionally adulterated with lead chromate.ⁱⁱⁱ

At a press event on April 3rd, Secretary Kennedy acknowledged that as many as 20 percent of the HHS firings were a mistake, and that reinstating these staff was "always the plan." He indicated that the CDC program that monitors lead exposure levels among children and manages prevention across the country was among the programs that would be re-instated.^{iv}

Yet, over a month later, no civil servants from DEHSP have been re-hired, including the lead prevention team. A spokesperson from HHS issued a statement to reporters saying that HHS is planning to continue the lead poisoning work within the new “Administration for a Healthy America.”^v Yet leaked budget documents^{vi} indicate that agency leaders are considering eliminating both the CDC’s childhood lead poisoning work and its national lead exposure registry as part of the AHA re-organization, meaning the lead poisoning work would not be fully included in final plans for the new agency.^{vii}

Moreover, the new AHA may not begin its work for months or even years. Failing to restore the division in the short-term leaves Americans exposed. As it stands, there is no federal team to carry out critical environmental health work—and no one to ensure that knowledge about how to prevent and solve toxic and other harmful exposures is passed on to the new agency.

The absence of our nation’s leading scientific experts in lead poisoning has already been felt. The week of the April firings, the City of Milwaukee was denied help from CDC solving an outbreak likely attributable to flaking lead paint in schools that exposed the city’s students to dangerous levels of lead.^{viii} All of the civil servants in the division with expertise to respond to the request had been eliminated.^{ix}

Environmental health is vital to Americans. This work prevents the contamination of the food we eat, the water we drink, and the air we breathe, ultimately protecting the health of the people we love. If we hope to make American healthy, the first step in this work must be getting the environmental health teams that were mistakenly fired on April 1st back at their jobs. We therefore urge you to immediately restore the Division of Environmental Health Science and Practice, and ensure their work continues to be fully funded in the final Presidential budget.

Sincerely,

American Academy of Family Physicians
Balanced
Center for Biological Diversity
Center for Science in the Public Interest
Consumer Federation of America
Government Accountability Project
Health Care Without Harm
Healthy Babies Bright Futures
Healthy Schools Campaign
Institute for Food Safety and Nutrition Security, George Washington University
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
National Association of School Nurses
National Environmental Health Association
National Environmental Health Association
National League for Nursing

ⁱ National Center for Environmental Health. About the Division of Environmental Health Science and Practice. January 10, 2024. <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/divisions-offices/about-division-environmental-health-science-practice.html> Accessed May 12, 2025

ⁱⁱ The White House. Establishing the President's Make America Healthy Again Commission. February 13, 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/establishing-the-presidents-make-america-healthy-again-commission/> Accessed May 12, 2025

ⁱⁱⁱ Troeschel AN, Buser MC, Winkquist A, et al. Investigation of lead chromium exposure after consumption of contaminated cinnamon-containing applesauce – United States, November 2023–April 2024. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep.* 2025;74:239–244.

^{iv} Haslett C. RFK Jr. announces HHS reinstating some programs, employees cut by mistake. *ABC News.* April 3, 2025. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/rfk-jr-announces-hhs-reinstating-programs-employees-cut/story?id=120463293> Accessed May 12, 2025.

^v Tin A. RFK Jr.'s cuts to CDC lead poisoning team bring efforts to help tribes, health departments to a standstill. *CBS News.* April 8, 2025. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/rfk-jr-hhs-layoffs-cdc-lead-poisoning/> Accessed May 12, 2025.

^{vi} Faust, J. New: A 64-page HHS restructuring proposal outlines sweeping cuts to US public health. April 16, 2025. *Inside Medicine.* April 16, 2025. <https://insidemedicine.substack.com/p/new-a-64-page-hhs-restructuring-proposal> Accessed May 12, 2025.

^{vii} *Ibid*, page 19.

^{viii} Bosman J. Milwaukee's lead crisis: flaky paint, closed schools and a CDC in retreat. *The New York Times.* April 18, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/18/us/milwaukee-schools-lead-cdc.html> Accessed May 12, 2025.

^{ix} Frazin R. Staff working on childhood lead exposure and cancer clusters fired from CDC. *The Hill.* April 3, 2025. <https://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/5230504-staff-working-on-childhood-lead-exposure-and-cancer-clusters-fired-from-cdc/> Accessed May 12, 2025.