

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 13, 2021

Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky, MD, MPH
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road - Mailstop E-92
Atlanta, Georgia 30329-4027

Dear Director Walensky:

We write today with significant concern about the widespread COVID-19 outbreaks on cruise ships. As you know, the Omicron variant is highly transmissible, causing the most explosive surge in cases since the beginning of the pandemic and prompting local, state, and federal governments, as well as many industries, to revise their COVID-19 protocols. We appreciate the agency's updated guidance for Americans to avoid travel on cruise ships regardless of vaccination status due to this new surge in cases,¹ but were troubled to learn of the agency's plans to let its Conditional Sailing Order (CSO) for cruise ships expire on January 15.² We strongly urge you to outline additional measures ahead of the January 15 CSO expiration date so further COVID-19 outbreaks on cruise ships can be prevented.

The reporting mechanisms under the current CSO are critical to ensuring cruise companies' transparency about COVID-19 cases on their ships. Currently, ships submit reports to the CDC about the number of passengers and crew who test positive for COVID-19 or have COVID-19-like symptoms. According to the most recent data on the CDC's website, all cruise ships with passengers in U.S. waters have enough positive COVID-19 cases to meet the CDC's threshold for an investigation.³ When the CSO expires, ships will be able to opt out of this reporting. We are concerned this will prevent the CDC from maintaining – and the public from having access to – updated information about COVID-19 cases on cruise ships.

¹ "COVID-19 and Cruise Ship Travel," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices/covid-4/coronavirus-cruise-ship> (accessed January 12, 2022).

² Alex Daugherty, "CDC lifting cruise ship restrictions despite 30-fold increase of Omicron cases," *PoliticoPro*, January 11, 2022, <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2022/01/cdc-lifting-cruise-ship-restrictions-despite-30-fold-increase-of-omicron-cases-2102151>.

³ "Cruise Ship Color Status," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, <https://www.cdc.gov/quarantine/cruise/cruise-ship-color-status.html> (accessed January 12, 2022).

Moreover, recent accounts suggest cruise ship companies are underreporting positive COVID-19 cases to those on board. Passengers have also expressed concern about the high number of people exempted from the vaccine mandate, the scarcity of crew members needed to properly enforce indoor mask rules for the thousands of passengers aboard,⁴ and insufficient social distancing.⁵ These reports and the significant number of ships with COVID-19 outbreaks appear to indicate failures of some cruise companies to properly adhere to the CSO, raising considerable concerns about unsafe conditions that could jeopardize the health of crew members and passengers alike. In light of these accounts, we are concerned that allowing the CSO to expire on January 15 and making the current framework voluntary could significantly curtail efforts to prevent COVID-19 outbreaks on cruise ships.

Considering these troubling developments, we urge you to extend the mandatory CSO framework, ensure it is strictly enforced, and, if needed, reevaluate whether the current guidance is the most appropriate to prevent COVID-19 outbreaks aboard cruises in light of the new variant.

While the world battles the highest surge in COVID-19 cases to date, prioritizing and strongly enforcing measures that maximize the safety of all those on board cruise ships is critical. Prematurely transitioning to a voluntary program could allow companies to skirt necessary public health measures. Without appropriate oversight, thousands of people in close proximity for days—and often weeks—at a time make conditions ripe for the continued spread of infections, jeopardizing our efforts against this pandemic, further imperiling passenger and crew safety, and threatening the operations of an industry hard-hit by the pandemic.

We look forward to hearing from you on this critical public health matter.

Sincerely,



DORIS MATSUI
Member of Congress



RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senate

⁴ Ceylan Yeginsu, “Cases Rise, Criticism Mounts, but Ships Keep Cruising,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), January 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/06/travel/coronavirus-cruise-ships-omicron.html>.

⁵ Meryl Kornfield, “Cruise passengers on holiday trips deal with outbreaks: ‘We’re sailing on a petri dish,’” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), December 25, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2021/12/25/christmas-cruises-covid/>.