

November 17, 2025

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.
U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20201

Re: Restoring the Foodborne Diseases Active Surveillance Network

Dear Secretary Kennedy:

The undersigned organizations and individuals urge you to support the Foodborne Diseases Active Surveillance Network (FoodNet), the only active foodborne illness surveillance network in the United States. FoodNet has established a proven track record of detecting foodborne illness cases and generating the most reliable, population-based estimates of disease prevalence. This system is vital to many stakeholders across the food system – including state, local, tribal and territorial government agencies and the food industry – informing our understanding of foodborne illness trends and allowing us to evaluate the success of efforts to reduce foodborne illness. Adequate funding of this system should serve as a key component in fulfilling your overall commitment to health and food safety. Accordingly, we respectfully request that you support a 50 percent (\$36 million) increase in funding for the CDC Food Safety Program, for a total of \$108 million for FY2027, in order to maintain critical programs needed to solve foodborne illness outbreaks, including FoodNet.

FoodNet was established in 1995 to provide more accurate surveillance data and reduce the national burden of foodborne disease. It has included collection of data to determine the burden of foodborne illness in the United States; monitor burden trends over time; attribute the burden to specific foods and settings; and inform public health practices and interventions aimed at preventing foodborne illness.[1] Historically, FoodNet has actively tracked laboratory-confirmed cases caused by eight major foodborne pathogens: *Salmonella*, Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli* (STEC), *Campylobacter*, *Cyclospora*, *Listeria*, *Shigella*, *Vibrio* and *Yersinia*. FoodNet staff in ten state and local sites regularly contact clinical laboratories to ensure that all cases associated with these eight pathogens are reported and that reported data are accurate and complete. FoodNet also conducts targeted studies of sporadic cases; surveillance for Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome (HUS), a serious and life-threatening complication that can arise after foodborne illness; population surveys; and special surveillance projects for emerging pathogens. For example, in 2010, FoodNet conducted a special surveillance project for *Cronobacter sakazakii*, the pathogen associated with the baby formula outbreak in 2022. FoodNet data has been used extensively to monitor progress in food safety and to set goals, such as the Healthy People 2030 goals on reducing listeriosis and other foodborne illnesses.[2] .

For years, FoodNet has taken on more tasks without corresponding budgetary increases. For the past decade, FoodNet funding levels have been flat at \$5 to \$6 million per year, despite increasing salary and laboratory costs. To address this funding discrepancy, CDC has sought to

realign expectations of its partners at FDA, USDA, and the FoodNet sites with respect to FoodNet. According to a CDC spokesperson, as of July 1, the agency “has reduced surveillance to just two pathogens: *Salmonella* and Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli* (STEC).”[3] Six other pathogens—*Campylobacter*, *Cyclospora*, *Listeria*, *Shigella*, *Vibrio* and *Yersinia*—will no longer be required to be reported.

FoodNet offers a return on investment that justifies its price tag. Total funding for FoodNet surveillance sites and CDC, estimated in 2015 to cost less than \$7 million, is several orders of magnitude lower than the economic impacts of the illnesses monitored by the program.[4] *Campylobacter* infections alone are estimated to cause up to \$6.8 billion in economic damages every year.[5] By curtailing active surveillance of these infections and those from the six other pathogens recently removed from FoodNet’s reporting requirements—which collectively cause an estimated 2.1 million illnesses each year, including 11,000 hospitalizations and 418 deaths[6]—regulatory agencies and industry alike will lose a critical tool to evaluate their prevention efforts and reduce the overall burden of foodborne disease.

In addition to FoodNet’s fundamental work to collect unique data on foodborne disease, state/local programs participating in FoodNet help to solve outbreaks, reporting more foodborne illness outbreaks than other jurisdictions, preventing illnesses and increasing opportunities for food companies to identify root causes of outbreaks. Importantly, outbreaks in FoodNet states have fewer victims on average than in other states.[7] In other words, states participating in FoodNet tend to detect outbreaks earlier than they might otherwise, preventing many illnesses. Notably, it was a FoodNet partner—the Maryland Department of Health—that delivered key evidence linking Boar’s Head deli meats to a *Listeria* outbreak that caused ten deaths last year.[8] Similarly, another FoodNet partner, the Connecticut Department of Health, tied a cluster of *Campylobacter* infections last year to raw milk sold by the Nature View Dairy, leading to a stop sale order and recall.[9]

FoodNet partners’ active surveillance results in the most comprehensive and timely data available on sporadic cases and trends in the overall foodborne illness burden. Other CDC programs, such as the Nationally Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System (NNDS), the Cholera and Other *Vibrio* Illness Surveillance (COVIS) and the *Listeria* Initiative are passive surveillance systems. In contrast to FoodNet, these systems passively wait for state, local, tribal and territorial public health agencies to voluntarily report illnesses. Not surprisingly, many jurisdictions lack the capacity to voluntarily report these illnesses in a timely manner, resulting in gaps and delays in the data transmitted to CDC.

A robust surveillance system gives public health officials insight into overall foodborne illness trends, bolsters consumer confidence in the food supply, avoids unnecessary food waste, and helps to keep food affordable. However, effective foodborne illness surveillance requires government to play a primary role in facilitating disease reporting across the country; collecting and sharing data on pathogens from case patient, food, and environmental samples; and coordinating epidemiological interviews and other investigative tasks. FoodNet plays a crucial role in these activities, and we urge you to fully fund its work.

The Food Safety Program at CDC has been chronically under-funded, particularly in the last few years; it received only \$72 million in FY2024. This amount is wholly inadequate to maintain FoodNet, including the continued reporting of the full scope of pathogens historically tracked by FoodNet partners, along with all other food safety work at CDC, which also passes through grants to state departments of health to fund epidemiology and laboratory work needed to solve outbreaks. This year, the program has also been asked to absorb additional functions as part of overall re-organization efforts, including environmental health, parasitic diseases and laboratory functions. In order to maintain FoodNet, along with these other critical programs needed to solve outbreaks, the Food Safety Program requires a 50 percent (\$36 million) increase in funding, for a total of \$108 million for FY2027. We call on federal policymakers to prioritize food safety by providing this vital funding.

Sincerely,

Active Food Safety

Alliance for Advanced Sanitation

Alliance for Advanced Sanitation

American Bakers Association

American Frozen Food Institute

American Spice Trade Association

Antibiotic Resistance Action Center, George Washington University

Beyond Celiac

Center for Food Safety

Center for Science in the Public Interest

Consumer Federation of America

Consumer Reports

Creme Global

FMI, The Food Industry Association

Food Animal Concerns Trust

Food Safety Strategy, LLC

Institute for Food Safety and Nutrition Security, George Washington University

Government Accountability Project

International Dairy Foods Association (IDFA)

Mars, Inc.

Meat Institute

National Confectioners Association

National Consumers League

National Environmental Health Association

Stop Foodborne Illness