

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

August 24, 2023

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Ave S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Becerra,

Thank you for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' support in the wake of this tragedy and for your upcoming visit to Maui along with Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response O'Connell and Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use Delphin-Rittmon.

We appreciate actions taken by the Department so far, including a swift public health emergency declaration in the State of Hawaii, which unlocked flexibilities in HHS programs. In particular, your Disaster Mortuary Operations Response Team and Victim Identification Center Team have offered essential expertise to recover and identify victims.

As you visit Maui, we ask you to take further actions to support the survivors, and ensure sustained access to health care and social services. While we continue to work with federal, state, and local stakeholders to identify specific needs, we see immediate opportunity for federal assistance, and request that you consider the following actions:

Work with Hawaii state and Maui county officials to assess behavioral health capacity on the ground and deploy additional federal behavioral health personnel. Demand for crisis counseling has already far surpassed Maui's capacity, which was facing a provider shortage before disaster struck. Mental health providers from across the state are flying to Maui, thus creating gaps in care in other communities. HHS has deployed five behavioral health staff to support crisis counseling so far. During your trip, HHS should speak with providers on the ground to understand needs, and then work with the Hawaii Department of Health, Hawaii Emergency Management Agency, and Maui Emergency Management Agency to determine federal surge capacity through the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, volunteer Medical Reserve Corps, and National Disaster Medical System.

Ensure HHS is using all existing emergency authorities, and provide available emergency funding to Maui.

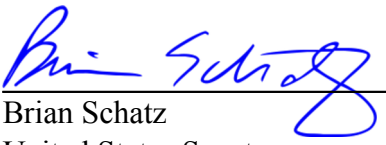
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The agency has partnered with Hawaii Department of Health (HI DOH), providing technical assistance on crisis counseling, psychological first aid, and other evidence-based tactics to help people process this trauma. Funding for crisis counseling is forthcoming through FEMA.

However, this funding stream is inadequate as some individuals will require mental and behavioral health treatment beyond the scope of crisis counseling. HI DOH is expected to submit an emergency mental health grant proposal to SAMHSA, and HHS should award funding as soon as possible.

- Administration for Children and Families. There were multiple Head Start and child care facilities destroyed in Lahaina, as well as foster and runaway youth impacted by this crisis. With the Public Health Emergency declaration, you have administrative and funding flexibilities that do not require specific state requests. These waivers should be leveraged to the fullest extent possible. When formal state plans are required, the agency should provide a streamlined process so that the Hawaii Department of Human Services can exercise all program waivers and flexibilities to support alternative operations for child care, Head Start, child welfare, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families programs.
- Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response & Office of Minority Health. Maui is a diverse community with 19% of people speaking a language other than English at home. Most common languages spoken on Maui other than English are Ilocano, Tagalog, Spanish, Hawaiian, Japanese, Tongan, and Marshallese. Individuals have the right to language access services when receiving health care, and these needs are acute during this crisis. HHS could work with state officials on the ground to assess existing capacity, and deploy interpreter services to augment existing resources in the state.

Thank you again for your efforts to support the people of Maui, and thank you for considering these requests.

Sincerely,


Brian Schatz
United States Senator


Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator


Ed Case
Member of Congress


Jim Tokuda
Member of Congress