Pennsylvania reports eighth measles death as the US loses elimination status

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On Wednesday, the Pennsylvania Department of Health announced the state's eighth measles-associated death this year, an unvaccinated resident of rural Clinton County. It came one day after the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) declared measles endemic again in the United States, 26 years after the country eliminated it.

State health departments have now reported 11 measles-associated deaths this year, eight in Pennsylvania, two in Wisconsin and one in New York. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in its update on Friday, still counts six. The agency adds state-confirmed deaths only after its own review and calls its figure "subject to change" while it drafts a standardized case definition for measles deaths with state epidemiologists. In the year measles returned, the federal health agency has left nearly half the dead off its tally.

The World Socialist Web Site described the response of governments to the COVID-19 pandemic as one of "malign neglect," the deliberate refusal to organize a response to a known danger. Testing ended, surveillance was dismantled and the dead went uncounted. The same method is now being applied to measles.

Pennsylvania has recorded 1,589 cases, more than one in four nationally, across 46 of its 67 counties, with 315 hospitalizations. The eight dead lived in five counties, three in Lancaster, two in Jefferson and one each in Clinton, Mifflin and Montour. The outbreak has long since moved beyond the Amish settlements of Lancaster County, which press coverage has treated as its source, into the rural heart of the state.

Nationally, the CDC has confirmed 5,838 cases in 47 jurisdictions as of Nov. 19, an increase of 426 in a single week and more than double the 2,289 recorded in all of 2025. Of those infected, 646 have been hospitalized. In Wisconsin, which added more cases than any other state in the week to Nov. 12, a child in Grant County became the state's second measles-associated death this month.

Measles is circulating because the barrier that kept it out has been allowed to collapse. Two doses of the vaccine are 97 percent effective, and coverage of 95 percent stops transmission. In Pennsylvania, kindergarten coverage fell from 95.5 percent in the 2020–21 school year to 92.7 percent in 2025–26, while the share of kindergartners with exemptions more than doubled, from 2.7 percent to 6 percent, according to CDC data. In Grant County, Wisconsin, where the second death occurred, only about 57 percent of 6-year-olds had received both doses in 2025, according to the state's immunization registry. Nationally, coverage fell to 92.4 percent in 2025–26, leaving about 280,000 kindergartners unprotected, according to the CDC.

PAHO's commission found that the same measles lineage had circulated in the United States, Mexico and Bolivia for 12 months or more. Across the Americas, PAHO has counted 58,213 confirmed cases and 82 deaths this year as of Nov. 13, compared with 12,806 cases in the same period of 2025. Each of the three countries must now submit a plan showing how it will interrupt transmission. PAHO's own regional tally listed three US deaths through the end of October, when Pennsylvania alone had reported five. The undercount in Washington is being written into the international record.

The officials responsible for that plan have announced that nothing will change. CDC Director Erica Schwartz said, "The measles elimination designation is not what protects Americans. Vaccination does," and said the loss will not alter the

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federal response. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. blamed “worldwide COVID-era disruptions” to childhood vaccination while declaring that he continues “to recommend MMR vaccination.” HHS spokesperson Emily Hilliard attributed the resurgence to vaccination gaps that opened years before this administration. In August, President Donald Trump signed an executive order calling for the MMR vaccine to be split into three separate shots, suggesting without evidence that the combined vaccine could be “quite lethal.”

The Democrats offer no alternative. Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer blamed the loss of elimination on “the pathological stupidity plaguing this administration.” Their explanation begins and ends with Trump and Kennedy and leaves out their own record.

National kindergarten coverage fell from 93.9 percent in 2020–21 to 92.5 percent in 2024–25, the school years of the Biden administration, as the World Socialist Web Site documented this month. The disruption Kennedy cites was real, but it was not an unavoidable consequence of the pandemic. An aggressive public health campaign to eliminate the virus would have protected routine immunization along with millions of lives. Instead, both parties abandoned the effort to stop COVID-19, replacing elimination with mitigation, and in September 2022 Biden declared the pandemic over.

The scale of the dismantling is laid bare in a feature by Brian Lawrence published Nov. 17 in the BMJ. As much as 30 percent of CDC staff have been laid off or have left without replacement, and about 80 percent of senior leadership positions lack a permanent appointee. Active surveillance for foodborne disease has been cut from eight pathogens to two, and the federal vaccine advisory committee is dormant.

The journal also reports that cyclospora was dropped from federal foodborne surveillance shortly before outbreaks spread to 21 states, that the CDC has left last year’s flu vaccine recommendations in place, citing “legal uncertainties,” and that fewer CDC scientists volunteered for the Ebola response in Congo than in 2014. The journal attributes the collapse to “political interference, budget cuts, and job losses” at an agency it calls “the envy of the world.” Its own source, Barbara Kowalcyk of George Washington University, makes clear that the austerity began earlier. “Before the current administration, public health had one hand tied behind our back, and we were managing.”

In an accompanying editorial, editor in chief Kamran Abbasi describes a “science manipulation complex” of corporations and compliant governments and condemns the British Labour government’s “Trump appeasing cuts” in overseas aid. His remedy, to “rage” against it and defend national scientific institutions, leaves untouched the social order that produces it.

A century ago, the workers’ movement treated epidemic disease as an enemy to be defeated, and the first workers’ state sent its scarce doctors against typhus in the middle of a civil war. Today the richest country in the world lets a disease it had defeated return, because the vaccines, clinics and surveillance needed to keep it out are treated as a cost to be cut. The abandonment of vaccination is part of a wider assault on the working class.

Restoring the elimination of measles requires what neither party will provide. It requires universal free vaccination, rebuilt surveillance, public health workers in every community and a coordinated effort spanning Bolivia, Mexico and the United States. Those measures can be won only by the working class, organized independently of both parties and across borders. The elimination of measles was a social gain of the last century. The profit system is now surrendering it. Winning it back requires the fight for socialism, the program of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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