

**United States House Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
“Putting Kids First: Addressing COVID-19’s Impacts on Children.”
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Testimony of

**Kelly Danielpour
Founder, *VaxTeen***

Good morning Chair DeGette, Ranking Member Griffith, and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on young people and for recognizing the importance of this topic.

My name is Kelly Danielpour, and I am the founder of VaxTeen, as well as a first-year undergraduate at Stanford University. In April of 2019, at the age of sixteen, I came across a post on Reddit that stunned me. The author was the same age as me but was facing a situation I'd never had to consider: his parents refused to allow him to be vaccinated. He had tried to reason with them but to no avail, and he was concerned. Yes, he feared the danger that vaccine-preventable diseases posed to his own health, but primarily, he was worried about the danger that he posed to those around him by being unvaccinated. I was struck by his dilemma and by his profound consideration for others. This sent me down a rabbit hole of research, where I discovered that many of my peers had similar queries about vaccinations, yet there was a lack of clear answers.

I was inspired to create VaxTeen, an organization that communicates directly with teenagers and young adults to counter the growing anti-vaccine movement. We work to educate young people on the importance of vaccines and empower them to make well-informed decisions regarding their own health. VaxTeen encourages those who are unvaccinated to catch up on vaccinations as soon as they are able to by helping them determine what vaccines they need and how they can receive them, depending on the applicable laws in the state in which they live. VaxTeen is also a platform to lobby for change. With teenagers nationwide now involved, we work both within our own communities and nationally to disseminate accurate information and encourage legislatures to enact policies expanding adolescents' access to vaccinations.

Clearly, much has changed since I discovered that initial Reddit post. About one year later, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic, and the fears I first encountered on Reddit became the fears of my entire generation. When would we be able to get vaccinated? What role could we play in making that happen? What risks were we posing to those around us and that we cared about? Were we safe?

The time I've spent running VaxTeen has been filled with endless questions and searching for answers. Every day, I speak to young people about what vaccines mean to them, their reasoning for why they do or do not want to get vaccinated, and how they can protect themselves and those they care about. There are certainly obstacles we're facing in convincing some young people to get vaccinated — most often spurred by misinformation — but it is clear to me how vital vaccines have come to feel to most of us. They're our way back to normal, allowing us to return to school and see our friends. They're our way of protecting our families and communities.

Two years ago, the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions held a hearing entitled "Vaccines Save Lives: What Is Driving Preventable Disease Outbreaks?" Notably, among those testifying was Ethan Lindenberger, an 18-year-old whose mother's opposition to vaccinations led him to post on Reddit in search of information, catch up on missed immunizations without the aid of his parents, and become a very vocal vaccine advocate. The hearing concluded by pointing out the irony that plagues vaccines: their success in preventing outbreaks of disease has led many to forget about their effectiveness and impact.

The pandemic has served as a startling public health lesson. Even teenagers who haven't experienced the loss of a family member or friend due to COVID-19 have suffered from prolonged social isolation and witnessed the economic devastation brought on by the disease. At this point, it's clear that we each have a responsibility to stop the transmission of disease—through vaccination, social distancing, and other public health measures—to ensure our collective health. I've witnessed many members of my generation take this to heart: volunteering for clinical trials, helping others navigate the sign-up process for vaccination appointments, and trying to educate those around them. As we work to bring an end to the pandemic, I hope we'll continue to focus on the needs of young people--ensuring their safety in the classroom so that in-person learning can continue, helping them catch up on routine vaccinations that were missed due to the pandemic, and expanding their access to vaccinations. Thank you.

Biography:

Kelly Danielpour is the founder of VaxTeen and a first-year undergraduate at Stanford University. At the age of sixteen, she was inspired to start VaxTeen after realizing that significant barriers prevented many of her peers from accessing vaccinations. The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic a year later further highlighted the necessity of VaxTeen, which educates young people about the importance of vaccines and empowers them to make well-informed decisions about their health.