

# **U.S. Sen. Baldwin, U.S. Reps. Bera and Peters: Introduce new bicameral legislation to track coronavirus variants**

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and U.S. Representatives Ami Bera, MD (D-CA) and Scott Peters (D-CA) are today introducing bicameral legislation to dramatically scale up our efforts to track coronavirus variants.

The U.S. is currently conducting sequence-based surveillance of approximately 0.3 percent of coronavirus cases, lagging far behind other nations. It is critical that the U.S. scale up its efforts to survey at least 15 percent of cases to better grasp new and emerging variants, understand their origins, and develop mitigation strategies. The virus has changed, and will continue to change as more Americans are vaccinated.

President Biden's American Rescue Plan includes a focus on identifying and addressing emerging strains of COVID-19, and funding to dramatically increase our country's sequencing, surveillance, and outbreak analytics capacity at the levels demanded by the crisis. The Tracking COVID-19 Variants Act would provide \$2 billion for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to support a robust, national sequence-based surveillance program that is vital to protecting public health and combatting the next phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, while preparing for emerging threats.

"Variants represent a growing threat to the health and security of our nation, and

right now the U.S. is lagging behind other countries in tracking new and emerging variants of this deadly virus,” said Senator Baldwin. “The U.S. should be a world leader in this effort, and that means we must invest more funding and resources to allow the CDC to ramp up national sequence-based surveillance and support our public health infrastructure so we can better identify, survey and understand these variants, and better protect all Americans from this public health crisis.”

“It is unacceptable that the United States lags far behind other countries in our use of genome sequencing – our best tool to detect and respond to the next COVID-19 variant that is bound to pop up as the virus adapts to more Americans getting vaccinated,” said Rep. Ami Bera, M.D. “It’s a public health imperative that we swiftly and dramatically scale up our efforts with a robust and national sequence-based surveillance program. I’m proud to join Senator Baldwin and Representative Peters in introducing the Tracking COVID-19 Variants Act to provide much-needed funding to the CDC’s genome surveillance programs as well as help states and localities with this work. It’s critical that we ramp up these programs to save American lives.”

“It is critical we utilize 21st century solutions to strengthen our COVID-19 response as new variants emerge. The Tracking COVID-19 Variants Act provides necessary financial support to scale up national genomic sequencing vital to track virus mutations and further protect public health,” said Rep. Peters. “The provision to expand the existing National Center for Health Statistics data linkage program is particularly important if we are to optimize all the data provided by sequence-based surveillance. In combination with other efforts like my Health STATISTICS Act, this bill would ensure our country is ready to combat the next phase of COVID-19 guided by science and innovation. I urge its swift passage by Congress.”

The Tracking COVID-19 Variants Act would provide \$2 billion in funding for the CDC to:

Support CDC’s Advanced Molecular Detection (AMD) Initiative, which is currently working to support the integration of genomics and genomic epidemiology, including national sequence-based surveillance conducted as part of the public-private partnership SPHERES (Sequencing for Public Health Emergency Response, Epidemiology, and Surveillance).

Require CDC to immediately issue national guidance supporting scientific collaboration around viral sequencing as a key strategy to our nation’s COVID-19 response, including guidance related to the sharing of specimens obtained from

patients, and the appropriate use of viral sequence data derived from these specimens.

Provide technical assistance and guidance and award grants or cooperative agreements to State, local, Tribal, or territorial public health departments to increase their capacity to conduct genetic sequencing of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. This funding may also be used to carry out activities to enhance the informatics capabilities of the current public health workforce and expand the numbers of qualified public health informaticians available.

The legislation also expands the existing data linkage program at the National Center for Health Statistics to allow for the temporary linkage of data across multiple sources, including genomic data, clinical data, and epidemiological data for the purposes of public health research.

“This bill will ensure the U.S. is a world leader in advanced molecular detection. Increasing sequencing capacity will play a key role in not only identifying, tracking, and mitigating the impact of the genetic new strains, but also vaccine development and distribution, testing, and getting our economy back on track,” said Stefano Bertuzzi, CEO of the American Society for Microbiology. “ASM and its members are at the forefront of these efforts. We look forward to working with Senator Baldwin, Congressman Bera and Congressman Peters to see them come to fruition.”

“We deeply appreciate Senator Baldwin’s leadership during this critical time in the COVID-19 pandemic. While vaccines are becoming more widely available, the emergence of new variants throughout the United States raises grave concerns. This bill will expand our nation’s capacity to track these variants, as we have been doing here at UW-Madison, where scientists are working hard to understand how COVID-19 spreads in Wisconsin. We strongly support the Tracking COVID-19 Variants Act, which will be an incredibly important weapon in our fight against COVID-19, and will also lay the foundation for rapid, targeted responses to influenza, HIV, and future emerging viruses,” said Robert N. Golden, Dean, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health.

The Tracking COVID-19 Variants Act is cosponsored in the Senate by Senators Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) and Gary Peters (D-MI).

More information on the legislation is available [here](#).



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