

Swine Flu: Coordinating a Federal Response
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
Chairman Joe Lieberman
April 29, 2009
AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

Good morning and thanks very much to our witnesses for joining us today to discuss federal efforts to respond to the outbreak of swine flu here in the United States.

Both your agencies have critical roles to play in dealing with this situation. Under the Homeland Security Act, Homeland Security Presidential Directives 5 and 21, and the National Response Framework, the Secretary of Homeland Security serves as the overall incident manager and coordinates resources across the federal government in support of the response to the threat, while the Department of Health and Human Services, including CDC, leads the Federal public health and medical response.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have confirmed 64 cases of the disease in the United States; Mexico has reported over 2,000 hospitalizations and 149 deaths; Canada has six confirmed cases.

Spain and Scotland each have one confirmed case, while a handful of other countries have suspected cases.

Obviously, the people of Mexico are bearing the brunt of this crisis. Our thoughts and prayers are with them. President Felipe Calderon has taken strong precautions, closing schools nationwide, banning large public gatherings, ordering bars and restaurants closed, distributing face masks at subway and bus stations, and setting up medical units at airports to discourage sick people from traveling. I hope these measures will help to bring the epidemic in Mexico significantly under control.

But, this is a fast-moving disease with the potential for becoming a global pandemic. Outbreaks of infectious disease are unpredictable and variable, and circumstances of this outbreak have changed dramatically over the past several days. In addition to the toll on public health, the outbreak may have an impact on tourism and commerce. And we may well see the re-emergence of the swine flu next fall when the flu season begins again. It is essential, therefore, that we remain on heightened

alert, take preventative action, and prepare for an escalation of the outbreak.

Madam Secretary, Rear Admiral Schuchat, (shook-it) I would say that, thus far, you have responded in a timely and efficient manner. The federal government, through CDC, DHS, the White House and other agencies, has tracked the spread of the disease, identified and addressed new cases in this country, and communicated its findings daily to the American people. Today, we will hear in greater detail about the actions our government is taking to manage this crisis.

So, our response to the swine flu outbreak has been reassuring. But we must ask if we are adequately prepared if this outbreak becomes a full-fledged pandemic?

Unlike other crises we have faced, pandemic flu is a threat that we have anticipated and begun to plan for. Nearly two decades ago, in 1992, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) reported that emerging microbial diseases are a serious threat, and that a number of modern demographic and environmental factors increasingly favor their spread. We have

since seen global outbreaks of Avian Bird Flu, West Nile Virus, SARS and a host of other infectious diseases - more than adequate confirmation that the IOM report was right.

In response, the CDC developed a national emerging infectious diseases strategy and President Clinton issued a presidential directive for federal agencies to begin a coordinated national response to the growing threat of infectious diseases.

In 2003, the nation experienced a particularly bad seasonal flu outbreak and flu vaccine shortages. I remember writing a letter to the Secretary of HHS at the time expressing concern over lack of resources and planning efforts for these types of occurrences.

Finally, in 2006, the Homeland Security Council published a National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza Implementation Plan, setting out a detailed roadmap for what to do in a crisis. States, supported by grants from DHS and HHS, have also developed plans for addressing pandemic flu. Today, I'd like to ask our witnesses how these plans have assisted with your response this past week.

Senator Collins and I are drafting legislation this Congress to implement key recommendations from the Graham-Talent WMD Commission report, which will include provisions strengthening the disbursement of counter measures during a pandemic or a biological attack – in other words, getting effective drugs quickly into the hands of those who need them.

Again, I would like to thank our witnesses for accommodating the Committee on short notice. We appreciate your efforts to work together to keep the public safe and well informed. Thank you. Senator Collins?