

Statement of Ranking Member Tom Carper
“The Federal Perspective on the State of Our Nation’s Biodefense”

Thursday, April 14, 2016

As prepared for delivery:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this timely hearing on federal biodefense efforts, particularly in light of the current threat posed by the Zika virus. Last fall, this Committee convened a hearing to examine a report issued by the Blue Ribbon Study Panel on Biodefense. We heard then from our good friends, Senator Joe Lieberman and Governor Tom Ridge, about our country’s capabilities to confront biological threats and how those capabilities could be strengthened. Needless to say, there is a lot of work to be done. Fortunately, the panel provided a number of recommendations to further enhance our ability to prevent, detect, respond to, and recover from, a biological incident.

Today we have the opportunity to discuss these recommendations with several of the agencies that would be responsible for implementing them. I’m eager to hear our witnesses’ thoughts on the Panel’s findings and to also hear how they believe we can further improve our country’s biodefense system. This is an important conversation to have in the context of recent global events, including several emerging, widespread outbreaks. Ebola continues to threaten West Africa. After claiming thousands of lives, the spread of the virus has declined significantly, thanks in no small part to the investments America made in the health systems of those countries that were hardest hit by the epidemic. That said, the recent news of more cases in Guinea and Liberia underline the need to continue supporting our international partners in their efforts to combat this disease.

We are also almost one year removed from a significant outbreak of highly pathogenic avian flu which decimated some parts of our nation’s poultry industry. While infections of poultry have been limited in number so far this year, we must remain vigilant and continue to enforce good biosafety practices at poultry farms across the country to safeguard against another epidemic.

Meanwhile, we are quickly approaching the beginning of mosquito season in most parts of the United States. Unfortunately, this presents us with a new threat, this one in the form of the Zika virus. The virus has spread explosively throughout Central and South America. It has already reached Puerto Rico and other U.S. territories and is expected to spread further as the weather warms. The World Health Organization estimates that as many as 4 million people in the Americas could contract Zika by the end of the year. Researchers continue to learn more about the virus every day, but it’s clear that the health impacts can be devastating, particularly for pregnant women and their unborn children. In fact, the CDC has now confirmed, what many have long speculated, that the Zika virus is a cause of several severe birth defects.

While most of the Zika cases diagnosed in American citizens to date have been traced to travel abroad, we must be prepared for the virus to present itself locally. So it’s been encouraging to see a proactive, coordinated response from the President and his Administration to this threat. For example, federal agencies are helping state and local governments enhance their capacity to

better detect and track the virus. There are also significant mosquito control efforts underway in areas most at risk.

We also know that medical countermeasures and vaccine development are being rigorously pursued. To help fund these efforts, the Administration announced last week its intent to redirect almost \$600 million from other programs - including funds originally designated for Ebola - and spend it on Zika response efforts. I believe the President made the right call in light of this threat. While these efforts continue, Congress should continue to carefully consider the President's request for additional resources to combat this threat. In addition, we must ensure that our public health officials have the tools that they need to protect us from and prepare us for Zika and future threats. But at the same time, we should not let our foot off the gas when it comes to our efforts to contain dangerous diseases such as Ebola and avian influenza.

With that, let me welcome our witnesses. We look forward to an informative and productive conversation on how to better integrate and strengthen our biodefense programs. This is an important hearing, not just for our committee, but for our nation. Bring it on!