TESTIMONY OF

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Concerning
Protecting Animal and Public Health: Homeland Security and Federal Veterinarian Workforce

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Senate Subcommittee on Oversight of Governmental Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia,
of the
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Good morning, Chairman Akaka and Members of the Committee. I am Marguerite Pappaioanou, a veterinarian and Executive Director of the Association of American Veterinary Colleges (AAVMC), which represents all 28 colleges of veterinary medicine and several departments of veterinary science and comparative medicine in the United States, as well as several other veterinary medical educational institutions in the US and abroad. AAVMC provides leadership for and promotes excellence in academic veterinary medicine to prepare the US veterinary workforce with the scientific knowledge and skills, and other essential competencies required to meet societal needs through the protection of animal health, the relief of animal suffering, the conservation of animal resources, the promotion of public health, and the advancement of medical knowledge. Prior to joining AAVMC, I was Professor of Infectious Disease and Epidemiology in the School of Public Health, with a joint appointment in the College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Minnesota. For 21 ½ years spanning the period from 1983 through 2004, I was a Commissioned Officer of the U.S. Public Health Service, assigned to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as an epidemiologist. As a federal veterinarian working at CDC, I conducted research on malaria prevention and control, designed and led implementation of disease surveillance for HIV infections, and guided and supported the development of the *US Guide to Community Preventive Services,* in addition to serving as Associate Director of Science and Policy in CDC's Office of Global Health.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today, with the invitation to respond to the GAO report "Veterinary Workforce—Actions are Needed to Ensure Sufficient Capacity for Protecting the Public and Animal Health"[1]. In particular, I will elaborate on the educational, recruiting and retention challenges facing the Federal veterinarian workforce, on past efforts to improve the ability of the Federal veterinarian workforce—which is an essential, but often unrecognized and underappreciated component of the US public health workforce—to prevent and control diseases impacting on human, animal, and environmental health. In particular I will briefly describe all that the US colleges of veterinary medicine are doing to recruit and educate our veterinary workforce to be prepared to serve at local, state, and federal levels to protect human and animal health. I will also provide several suggestions on actions that in my opinion are needed to ensure sufficient US capacity at the federal levels for protecting our public and animal health.

AAVMC commends the Committee, the GAO, and the Federal agencies that contributed to the report for investigating the veterinarian workforce shortage in the federal government and for producing a report with a high level of thoroughness, quality, and offering specific recommendations to address the workforce shortage, which is putting our nations public, animal, and environmental health at risk. We agree with all of the recommendations of the GAO report, and ask that Congress, in its oversight role of the federal workforce, take steps to ensure that the recommendations are implemented fully. It is critical that there be an ongoing, comprehensive assessment and understanding of the sufficiency of our federal government-wide veterinarian workforce, and that there be a plan in place to ensure that the need is met.

AAVMC believes that Congress must provide continued leadership and be actively engaged and involved in implementing solutions recommended in the GAO report to overcome the challenges that are leading to this critical public, animal, and environmental health workforce shortage.

One of the greatest obstacles the veterinarian profession faces is the public's perception of the role and contribution of veterinarians to society. In addition to the important contributions to our nations mental and physical health through the promotion and protection of the health of our beloved companion animals, largely unrecognized are the important contributions veterinarians make to society and public health as outlined in the GAO report.

The opening letter of the GAO report accurately states that veterinarians, and specifically veterinarians employed by the federal government, play a vital role in the defense against animal diseases—whether naturally or intentionally introduced. Veterinarians are essential for diagnosing, controlling, and eradicating diseases which are spread between animals and humans such as avian influenza, tuberculosis, and salmonella, just to name a few. Veterinarians play a critical role in ensuring the safety of the US food supply and help prevent foodborne illness and assure the humane treatment of animals in the marketing and slaughter process. Veterinarians, especially those in the federal government, are leading the way on cutting edge research that benefits humans, animals, and other living things. For example, USDA's Agricultural Research Service employs veterinary researchers to find new and improved ways to detect and prevent such important diseases as avian influenza,

tuberculosis in cattle, West Nile virus in birds, and bovine spongiform encephalomyopathy or mad cow disease—all of which can and have infected humans.

The recently published Institute of Medicine Report—HHS in the 21st Century: Charting a New Course for a Healthier America[2]—identified the nation's top health challenges. Among them were developing prevention and treatments methods for diseases that currently lack them (requiring biomedical research scientists – veterinarians -- well versed in comparative medicine and animal models), global threats to health including pandemics, emerging infections often originating in animal populations, bioterrorism (with over 80% of bioterrorism agents of concern spread in nature from animals to humans), natural disasters (which often require preparedness and response of both human and animal health experts), and climate change (requiring a workforce having a broad perspective of the relationship among humans, animals, and the environment), the crumbling public health infrastructure (which is impacting on education of a sufficient veterinary workforce), and social, environmental and behavioral factors affecting health (many of which involve a safe food supply, the human-animal bond, international trade of livestock, poultry, and other factors). As the GAO report and my fellow panelists have documented, without question veterinarians are essential to the multiple agencies within USDA, HHS, DHS, and other Federal departments listed in the report, and therefore, to the Departments at large in fulfilling their missions.

AAVMC, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), and other institutions have recognized for some time that there is a growing veterinarian workforce shortage that is impacting on the numbers of veterinarians going into federal service to meet the critical public,

animal, and environmental health needs being discussed today. The shortage of veterinarians in the federal public and animal health workforce -- the only health professionals educated to address the health needs comparatively, across all species— is just one component of the serious problem facing all segments of the veterinary profession. In fact, there is a significant shortage of veterinarians nationwide, particularly those practicing food supply veterinary medicine (ensuring the health of livestock and poultry pre-slaughter, where the safety of our food supply begins), rural medicine, public health at local and state levels, diagnostic laboratory medicine, and biomedical research.

Veterinary medicine is a small -- and at this point, we would maintain too small -- profession. As the size of the need is considered, realize that if you assembled all of the veterinarians in the U.S. you would not fill the FedEx football field just outside Washington, DC!

In contrast to virtually all the other major health professions, where the number of educational institutions has increased with time to match increases in population and societal need, the number of our US colleges of veterinary medicine (28 colleges in 26 states) has not changed over the past 25-30 years, save for a single new college established with private funding in the late 1990s in California. Therefore, the number of graduates nationally has remained at approximately 2600 over the past 30 years despite an increase in the U.S. population by 78 million people, with the associated increase in need for dietary animal protein, new relationships among human, domestic animals and wildlife, and with an increasing companion animal population. The GAO report states that the US Bureau of Labor statistics

predicts that demand for veterinarians will increase by 35 percent, or an increase of 24,000 jobs, from 2006 to 2016. Where will all of these new veterinarians come from?

To meet this increased need, either new colleges of veterinary medicine should be established, or the size of our classes in our colleges of veterinary medicine should be increased by substantial numbers. This latter option, although requiring new facilities because current facilities are maxed out in the numbers of students that can be accommodated, is considered the most cost-effective approach. We have impressive numbers of students applying to our colleges each year—with approximately 6,000 students applying for 2500-2600 freshman class slots nationwide each year—but we are turning many qualified, extremely interested and committed, bright, aspiring veterinary students away!

The educational facilities needed to educate veterinary medical students are unique. Specialized teaching, research, and animal care and handling buildings to meet the increasing demand for additional graduates are needed. Over the past three Congresses, AAVMC and the AVMA have advocated for federal support to match and or complement state funding to ensure these educational and research facilities are built in order to meet national preparedness and security needs. Veterinary medical education is a national resource with the 28 colleges in 26 states providing veterinarians, and protecting human and animal health for all of the states and US territories. The AAVMC has compiled the needs of all our colleges to increase class enrollment and has a list of “shovel ready” projects that could help alleviate this critical situation. Federal stimulus money would provide construction jobs and long-lasting employment opportunities at our colleges. Increases in our veterinary workforce at large would

also lead to employment of veterinary technicians, and other people. AAVMC is ready to work with the federal government to see that this happens.

Currently our US colleges of veterinary medicine are doing their best with very limited resources to increase class enrollment. They are also working with private and public sector partners to increase awareness of and promote student interest in careers in food safety, public health, animal health prevention and control programs, and biomedical research. These efforts, of which I will briefly describe several exciting programs, have shown that there is no shortage of interest by our veterinary medical students in these key areas.

Currently, 22 of our 28 colleges of veterinary medicine are providing programs and/or joint degree programs in public health. These programs are well subscribed, although the approximate $35,000-$50,000 cost of an added year of public health education to the average debt load of $120,000 accrued during the four year DVM program prevents interested veterinary medical students from pursuing this option. And the low salaries offered by the federal government to veterinarians graduating from these programs makes this option even less viable from a financial perspective.

In other programs, AAVMC continues to partner with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to sponsor Veterinary Medical Student Day at CDC. Every other year over 300 veterinary medical students and their faculty mentors from all of our 28 colleges of veterinary medicine travel to CDC in Atlanta. There they learn about opportunities and careers

in public health, public health disease surveillance, how to conduct outbreak investigations, prevention and control programs, and engage in public health exercises.

In another important partnership, AAVMC and its member institutions collaborate with industry, NIH, and other research institutions to sponsor a Veterinary Summer Scholars Research Program. Each year, between 300-400 veterinary students carry out research projects, and in early August they convene at one of our colleges of veterinary medicine to present their findings, and to learn about opportunities in biomedical research.

In a third important partnership with USDA, our colleges of veterinary medicine each year submit nominations of veterinary medical students to the USDA sponsored Smith-Kilborne Program, which acquaints veterinary medical students with various foreign animal diseases which potentially threaten our domestic livestock animal population. The program includes both classroom presentations on diseases and their implications combined with laboratory experiences. Following the seminar, students share their new knowledge with other students back at home. The Smith-Kilborne Program is conducted at the Cornell College of Veterinary Medicine in Ithaca, NY and the Plum Island Animal Disease Center, Plum Island, NY. AAVMC welcomes opportunities to partner with other federal government agencies to better highlight the multitude of career options available to veterinary medical students.

AAVMC also partners with AVMA, the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians, and others in hosting a career fair at our annual meeting to present aspiring veterinary students with information on the spectrum of career opportunities in veterinary medicine, focusing on the areas under discussion today.

Despite great interest shown by our students in these areas however, it is as they consider and compare the benefits and costs of different career options, that we lose them to clinical companion animal practice. In graduating with the on average $120,000 debt load that they incur, with the low salaries offered to veterinarians entering the federal workforce and which continues over time, many graduates feel that they have no choice but to go into clinical practice, or to work in industry, or seek academic research positions that will provide significantly greater salary and benefits, which will allow them to pay back their student loans and to raise families with a reasonable quality of life.

In conclusion, the colleges of veterinary medicine are offering many programs and providing important education and special opportunities to prepare and alert students to career opportunities in food safety, public health, environmental health, and biomedical research at federal, state, and local levels. But we emphasize that awareness and education alone are not enough to address the workforce shortage documented in the GAO report. It is the attractiveness of the career programs and the level of salary, grade, benefits, opportunities for advancement, and professional growth that are commensurate with the education that veterinarians receive that in the end will be the most important driving factors.

Therefore, we ask Congress to consider the following actions to address the veterinarian workforce shortage putting US public, animal, and environmental health at risk.

We ask the support of Congress to strongly urge the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to include veterinarians in their planned strategic department-wide approach to

assessing and meeting workforce needs. Veterinarians are critical for HHS to meet its mission given the increasing number of emerging zoonotic diseases, the threat of pandemic influenza and bioterrorism events, food-borne outbreaks involving the human and pet food supply, the impact of the human-animal bond on emergency preparedness and response, and the need for expertise in laboratory animal medicine, animal welfare, and animal models used in finding new cures and therapies, It is because the veterinary profession is small (a consequence of stagnant numbers of veterinary schools and class sizes from lack of adequate investments in veterinary public health infrastructure) that the number of veterinarians employed by HHS overall fails to meet the department threshold number required to be considered (as stated in the GAO report). We maintain that number of veterinarians employed alone is an inappropriate criterion for inclusion—it is having the basic expertise on staff that should be addressed.

We ask that Congress step forward and provide meaningful financial resources to our US colleges of veterinary medicine in ways that will permit meaningful increases in class size sufficient to meet public and private veterinary workforce needs. We greatly appreciate passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act, enacted in 2008, which was intended to increase capacity at veterinary colleges—but the bill in providing for minor renovations only, will not allow veterinary colleges to build the facilities needed to significantly increase class sizes.

We ask that Congress appropriate much higher levels of funding to the National Veterinary Medical Services Act, enacted originally in 2003, at levels that would allow repayment of a significant portion of debt loads accrued by veterinarians, to a significant

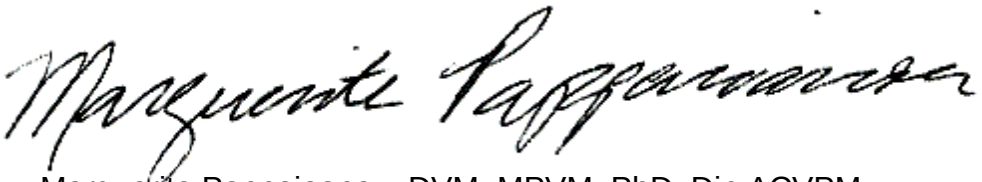
number of veterinarians, as a real incentive to attract veterinarians into working in underserved areas, USDA is expected to implement the program this year, and therefore, would be ready to receive increased levels of funding.

We recommend that Congress provide funding for scholarships to support veterinary medical students working toward a degree in public heatlh, or joint or post-doctoral masters or doctoral research degrees needed for careers in biomedical research. Too frequently, scholarship programs aimed at increasing our nation's research capacity, including several by NIH, are restricted to physicians only.

We ask that Congress enact legislation that would ensure that the personnel system grades, salaries, incentive and retention pay of veterinarians working in the federal government be significantly increased—to levels comparable to what veterinarians can earn in private clinical companion animal practice—in order to attract and retain our best and brightest veterinarians to federal service in protecting and promoting our nation's public, animal, and environmental health.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to visit with you and your subcommittee about the need to assure sufficient capacity for protecting public and animal health by an appropriate staffing level of veterinarians across the federal government and in the private sector. The AAVMC and all veterinary medical colleges in the US are keenly aware of the shortage of veterinarians in our federal public and animal health work force and stand ready to partner with Congress to address this issue that affects the health and safety of all Americans.

Sincerely,



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(2) HHS in the 21st Century: Charting a New Course for a Healtheir America. National Academy of Sciences. 2009. Accessed February 23, 2009 at http://www.nap.edu/catalog/12513.html