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PUBLIC HEALTH GROUP CALLS FOR LONG-TERM INVESTMENT FROM PRESIDENT, CONGRESS

\$10 BILLION OVER 10 YEARS NEEDED FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

WASHINGTON, DC—A public health group today called on the President to commit to spending \$10 billion over 10 years to improve the capacity of state and local public health agencies, starting this year with a \$1 billion budget request for these activities through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The non-profit group, Trust for America's Health, said the commitment is needed to better protect the nation's health.

“The initial funding approved by Congress and the President last year is a good start to rebuilding the public health system. But to repair public health after decades of neglect, we need a long-term investment,” said Dr. Shelley Hearne, executive director of Trust for America's Health (TFAH). “To protect the health of our communities, our front-line defense must be public health officials who have the tools they need to do the job.”

Last year's supplemental appropriations contained \$865 million for improving state and local public health capacity in addition to other preparedness funding. At that time, lawmakers recognized that this was an initial investment and that more funding would be needed this year.

“There is wide agreement on the need to improve our public health system. Across the country, there must be more and better-trained health officials, state-of-the-art communications networks, and much more to protect the public from unforeseen emergencies of tomorrow, as well as ongoing serious health concerns like cancer and asthma.

“We can't look at public health spending as a one-shot deal. There must be a sustained effort to rebuild the integral network responsible for protecting our health,” said Hearne. “The President and Congress should commit to \$10 billion over 10 years to support public health infrastructure in the right way.”

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In addition to more and better-trained public health professionals, and communications networks, investments are needed for better-equipped laboratories, tracking of diseases and monitoring of environmental exposures, early warning systems, improved coordination and integration for local, state and federal preparedness capabilities, and improved surge capacity and rapid response capabilities of hospitals.

Hearne urged an overall increase in funding for CDC. "As the primary federal agency responsible for the public health of our country, CDC needs the resources to be up to their great task of putting research into practice," said Hearne. "A cut in CDC's bottom-line would be robbing Peter to pay Paul. CDC needs increased resources to protect the public health from all threats -- whether it's today's asthma epidemic or a potential terrorist attack."

The group also called on the President to include \$100 million in his budget specifically for tracking chronic diseases like asthma and cancer and any potential links to environmental factors.

Currently, there is no nationwide network to track where and when chronic diseases occur. In the fiscal year 2002 appropriations, almost \$30 million was provided for health tracking. Of that money, \$12 million is dedicated for the first pilot health tracking program, which will monitor the health effects of and any related environmental exposures suffered by the September 11 relief workers. Another \$17.5 million will go to states to establish a nationwide health tracking network. Additional money this year would help expand health tracking to more states.

"Not knowing where and when chronic diseases occur and whether they have any possible relationship with factors in the environment is like starting a road trip without a map. To better prevent illnesses, public health officials need more and better health information to guide prevention strategies," added Hearne.

According to CDC, Chronic diseases account for 70 percent of all deaths in the United States, 70 percent of which are preventable.

Trust for America's Health (TFAH) is a national non-profit organization whose mission is to protect the health and safety of all communities, especially those most at risk of environmental and other public health threats. Its goal is to strengthen the nation's public health system through science-based research, community partnerships, education, and advocacy. TFAH's website is: www.healthyamericans.org.