



TRUST FOR AMERICA'S HEALTH COMMENDS HOUSE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM ON FLU HEARING

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Washington, DC, February 10, 2005 – Trust for America's Health (TFAH) commends the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Government Reform for holding today's hearing, "The Perplexing Shift from Shortage to Surplus: Managing This Season's Flu Shot Supply and Preparing for the Future" to explore this important and timely issue.

"The nation was caught off-guard by the recent flu vaccine shortage and we are lucky that this has been a relatively mild flu season," said Shelley A. Hearne, DrPH, Executive Director of TFAH. "The announcement of the limited vaccine supply created confusion about who should get shots and when, and demonstrated the inconsistencies in state policies and levels of preparedness. Now we have senior citizens wondering why they waited in lines for hours for shots when there is now an announced 'surplus.'"

"The difficulties we encountered this flu season are sadly an indication of America's tenuous readiness for a fast-moving epidemic or even a bioterror attack. We need to find a way to encourage domestic production of flu vaccine while addressing the important concerns of potential manufacturers. A flu epidemic would be catastrophic to America's health and economy," Hearne continued.

Numerous public health experts warn of the imminent possibility of a pandemic flu outbreak, which would mean a new or highly-contagious strain of the flu that would require months to create a new vaccine to counter.

Currently, many health experts are concerned that the recently discovered avian bird flu in Asia could mutate into a highly transmissible virus that humans have no natural immunity against. Model risk-assessment projections estimate that such a virus could kill 252,659 Americans in the first wave of a pandemic outbreak (based on a 35 percent infection rate and only one percent mortality impact model).

To prepare as much as possible against a flu pandemic and to encourage a more stable and accessible vaccine supply, TFAH makes several recommendations:

Public Health Preparedness

- **Improved Leadership, Planning, and Coordination:** During crisis situations, an established chain-of-command and well-defined roles and responsibilities for seamless operations between different medical and scientific functions is essential;
- **Expert and Comprehensive Workforce:** Highly-trained and fully-staffed experts of scientists and other public health professionals must be specifically trained in the protocol and logistics of flu preparedness;

- **Modernized Technology:** State-of-the-art laboratory equipment, information collection, and health tracking systems must be available at a moment's notice;
- **Pre-Planned, Rapid Emergency Response Capabilities and Precautions:** Tested planning and safety precautions to mitigate potential harm to communities and public health professionals and first responders are crucial. In the event of a pandemic, states would need to be able to rapidly distribute medical supplies and equipment to hard-hit or at-risk areas; only 30 states had approved pandemic flu plans according to TFAH's "Ready or Not? Protecting the Public's Health in the Age of Bioterrorism" from December, 2004.
- **Immediate, Streamlined Communications Capabilities:** Coordinated, integrated communication among all aspects of the public health system and with the public is essential.

Vaccine Development

- **Improving Stockpile Development, Distribution, and Administration Systems:** In the event of a major outbreak or emergency, most of the nation would be left scrambling to distribute and administer vaccines and antidotes. A prioritized national goal should be required for all states to achieve "green" status; a level currently assigned to only six states;
- **Limit Liability to Encourage Vaccine Development and Protect Workers:** Liability protections and additional incentives are needed to encourage private industry to invest in crucial research and development for vaccines and to provide protection for both public health and private health care workers who could be putting themselves in harm's way. Many manufacturers also cite insufficient market size and extensive financial and production times as reasons to stay away from vaccine development. TFAH recommends the creation of a bi-partisan panel of experts to explore the complications of vaccine policy and to help encourage research, development, and delivery;
- **Encouraging More Effective Vaccines:** The initial efforts to make cell-based cultures as opposed to the current egg-based cultures will result in a more stable and dependable strain of flu vaccine and should be prioritized.

TFAH's February 2004 flu report , TFAH's August 2004 immunizations report, and TFAH's December 2004 bioterrorism report are available at www.healthyamericans.org