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HEALTH GROUP ASKS CONGRESS TO INVEST IN NATIONWIDE HEALTH TRACKING

Funding Tracking Pilot Programs in States Would Help Prevent Chronic Diseases, Begin Process for Nationwide Coverage

Washington, DC – A new public health advocacy organization called on Congress today to begin funding a Nationwide Health Tracking Network that would monitor and track chronic diseases and their potential links to environmental factors.

In a letter to members of the House and Senate appropriations committees, the Trust for America's Health (TfAH) asked lawmakers to add \$60 million to this year's spending bill for the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to fund 10 state pilot programs as a framework for developing a Nationwide Health Tracking Network.

The funding would support coordinated state efforts to track where and when chronic diseases like asthma and childhood cancer occur, as well as possible links to environmental factors, to gather better information to help prevent them. Every year, these and other chronic diseases cause 70 percent of all deaths in this country.

Also funded under the request are regional laboratories, chronic disease specialists, and state environmental health investigators to lead rapid response teams when a disease cluster or other health emergency is detected. In addition, the \$60 million request would allow CDC to work with state and local public health officers to establish standards in the states and across the country for a health tracking network.

"We believe it is particularly important to support state and local health officers who are often without the tools they need to protect the health of the citizens in their communities," said Shelley Hearne, executive director of TfAH.

While asking Congress to begin funding the pilot programs as a first-step to a nationwide coordinated health tracking system, TfAH pointed to the committees' own request in last year's appropriations bill for CDC to explore the possibility of creating such a network.

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A Nationwide Health Tracking Network was first recommended in a Pew Environmental Health Commission report issued in September 2000 to identify and track chronic disease and monitor relevant environmental factors. The report estimated that an expenditure of \$275 million – less than \$1 dollar for every American – would establish this network. The \$60 million requested in this year’s budget is a downpayment toward full funding of the Network. Health-Track, a national public health organization, has been working with a variety of health groups to raise awareness of the need for the Network.

“A nationwide health tracking network is the way for us to get basic health and environmental data that is all too often lacking today. But what is most important will be to turn that data into useful knowledge that our communities can act on to protect their families from these chronic diseases,” said Jim O’Hara, executive director of Health-Track.

Chronic disease is the number one killer in the US, accounting for seven out of 10 deaths each year, yet as a nation, we do not currently track chronic disease such as diabetes or Alzheimer’s. Certain chronic conditions with suspected links to environmental hazards, like asthma and birth defects, are on the rise. About 100 million Americans, more than a third of our population, suffer from some form of chronic disease.

To better protect the health of the American people, CDC’s overall budget for next year should be supported at \$5 billion, Hearne urged the appropriators. In her letter she declared, “Health defense should be the country’s number one commitment.”

Health-Track is a project that was established with a grant to Georgetown University from The Pew Charitable Trusts, one of the nation’s largest foundations with a substantial commitment to improving health and the environment. Health-Track seeks to improve the nation’s capacity to prevent chronic diseases starting with the establishment of nationwide networks to track these illnesses, as well as exposure to environmental hazards.

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More information on Health-Track can be found at www.health-track.org. For additional information on TFAH, call 202-589-0940.