



## NEW REPORT EXAMINES MEDIA ATTITUDES AND COVERAGE OF PANDEMIC FLU

### *Report: Media Representatives Recognize Their Crucial Role During Pandemic, Believe Nation is Still Unprepared*

**Washington, DC, May 22, 2006** – A report released today by Trust for America’s Health (TFAH) and the Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University finds that journalists covering public health issues see a government and society that is “thoroughly unprepared” for a pandemic flu outbreak.

Peter D. Hart Research Associates authored the report, which is based on 20 one-on-one telephone interviews conducted from March 3 to 29, 2006, with leading health journalists, representing national and regional media from print and broadcast organizations. The interviews assessed the media’s take on issues related to avian flu and pandemic flu, including preparedness, the seriousness of the threat, and obstacles to covering the issues.

Public health journalists in the study view the threat of a pandemic as highly serious. Respondents believe a pandemic could lead to potential “societal breakdown,” “chaos,” and “panic.” And, the vast majority of respondents judge the nation’s response to pandemic flu to be either insufficient, misdirected, or both.

Journalists in the study recognize the federal government has taken positive steps to prepare for a pandemic flu outbreak, particularly toward investing in vaccine research, but overall, they criticize the “generalities” that they view permeate preparedness planning, citing such areas of weakness as unclear government leadership and poor communication with the business community and the public on how to maintain day-to-day life during a pandemic. For instance, one respondent believed a pervasive divisiveness in the government is hampering preparedness efforts, with a high likelihood that these jurisdictional and political rivalries will only intensify during a crisis. Reporters also cite problems with emergency hospital preparedness as one of their biggest concerns.

Additionally, the journalists feel the media would play an important role during a flu pandemic as a crucial link to the public. News organizations would have to strike a balance between working with the government to disseminate accurate and timely information to the public, and holding policymakers accountable for pandemic-related decisions and actions. One respondent believed avian flu could “change life as we know it,” and wanted coverage to prepare the public without being alarmist or causing panic. Other journalists are wary of the sometimes “sensational” and “irresponsible” coverage of avian and pandemic flu and suggested that due to the subject’s complexity, covering this story should be restricted to journalists with the background and sources to accurately portray the threat. Journalists also believe the public has adopted a “wait and see” approach to pandemic flu, with few Americans truly understanding the threat or what they can do to prepare.

The full report memo, authored by Hart Research and discussing specific findings in more detail, is available at [www.healthyamericans.org](http://www.healthyamericans.org).

Also today, TFAH released a study of the media's coverage of avian flu and pandemic flu issues from 1997 through 2005. The study, which used a media tracking database to search U.S. daily newspapers and wires, found 165 articles that discussed pandemic flu in 1997, the year the H5N1 virus was first discovered in a Hong Kong child. Coverage rose to nearly 8,700 pandemic-related articles in 2005, as the H5N1 virus spread in bird populations throughout the world and continued to sporadically infect humans. The media tracking study, including analysis and highlights of significant milestones in the rise of H5N1 as a pandemic threat, is available at [www.healthyamericans.org](http://www.healthyamericans.org) and [www.pandemicfluandyou.org](http://www.pandemicfluandyou.org).

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*Trust for America's Health is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to saving lives by protecting the health of every community and working to make disease prevention a national priority.*