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HOMELAND SECURITY PLAN COULD COMPROMISE THE CDC AND BROAD PUBLIC HEALTH PROTECTION

Separating Bioterrorism Preparedness from Rest of Nation's Public Health Infrastructure Would Skew Priorities and Hinder Effectiveness, Groups Say

Washington, DC – Transferring responsibility for bioterrorism preparedness to the proposed Department of Homeland Security would weaken broader efforts to protect the public's health, according to a coalition of 29 public health groups.

In a letter to President Bush and Congressional leaders (attached), the groups warned that shifting certain public health preparedness functions from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to the new Department "will diminish the very dual-purpose system we now need to strengthen."

"The preparations required to respond to bioterrorism and naturally occurring public health threats are indistinguishable," the letter says. "Both require the same strong public health infrastructure. ... From communications networks to disease surveillance, trained personnel and laboratory capacity, as well as many other functions, public health fundamentals must be refortified in a way that will address the full range of health threats facing our nation."

The homeland security plan as currently envisioned could reduce the efficiency and responsiveness of public health agencies, the groups say. "The idea of separating bioterrorism preparedness from the rest of the nation's public health infrastructure is like separating the emergency room from the hospital," said Dr. Shelley Hearne, executive director of Trust for America's Health (TFAH), which spearheaded the letter. "Neither piece of the system will be stronger if this is done -- both will be weaker."

Twenty nine health and public health groups signed the letter to the President, including the National Association of County and City Health Officials, the American Nurses Association, and the Association of Public Health Laboratories.

A hearing on the proposed Department of Homeland Security is scheduled Tuesday, July 9 in the U.S. House Committee on Energy and Commerce's Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations.

Homeland Security Plan Would Override Recent Landmark Legislation

The letter also notes that during the last two years, Congress has passed two landmark bills to boost public health preparedness, the Public Health Threats and Emergencies Act of 2000 (PL-106-505) and the Public Health Security and Bioterrorism Response Act of 2002 (PL-107-288). The Homeland Security plan “is likely to undermine the purpose and vision of these laws and would reverse the most important steps the nation has taken in decades to achieve broad-based public health preparedness,” the groups say.

As the premier federal public health agency, CDC this year has distributed about \$1 billion to help improve state and local public health agencies’ bioterrorism preparedness. TFAH has welcomed the funding but noted that the CDC’s guidelines on how to spend it do not help the nation prepare for the number one killer of Americans today -- chronic diseases like cancer, heart disease, asthma and Parkinson’s disease.

Opinion Poll Underscores Public’s Broader Health Concerns

Dr. Hearne also noted that in a recent public opinion poll sponsored by TFAH, when it comes to their health, voters’ concern about biological and chemical terrorism ran high, but concern about chronic diseases like cancer and heart disease was as high or higher.

According to the poll*, conducted by the bipartisan team of The Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies, voters express the greatest concern about cancer, with 77% saying it is the health problem that concerns them the most (41%) or a great deal (36%). Heart disease comes in second with a combined score of 66%, and “disease caused by environmental factors like pollution” came in third at 60%. Fifty-four percent say biological terrorism is one of the issues that concerns them the most or a great deal, and 51% rank chemical terrorism this highly.

“The public wants greater protection from the full range of health threats,” Hearne said. “But unfortunately, the homeland security plan as currently envisioned could skew public health priorities, weaken coordination and hamstring our ability to deal with both bioterrorism and other health threats.”

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** TFAH commissioned a national survey on the public’s perceptions of health risks and policy priorities. Telephone interviews with 1,000 registered voters were conducted from March 1-6, 2002. The statistical margin of error for the voters sample as a whole is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The margin of error for subgroups is larger. To receive the full results, call Amy Goffe at 202-589-0940.*

The Trust for America's Health 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. For more information, visit www.healthyamericans.org.