

**Chairman Roy Blunt Opening Statement**  
**Senate Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services,**  
**Education and Related Agencies**

**Hearing Titled “Review of the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Other  
Emerging Health Threats”**

**March 14, 2019**

*(As prepared for delivery)*

Good morning. Thank you to our witnesses for being here.

I called today’s hearing to highlight the importance of emerging health threats to America’s security and economic wellbeing. With the second largest Ebola outbreak currently occurring in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, antibiotic resistance a global danger, and an impending flu outbreak every year, we need to remain focused on these threats. Disease knows no boundaries. Outbreaks of infectious diseases not only spread from country-to-country and impact Americans’ health, but also affect trade and travel. It is clear that our investments to improve global health have a direct impact on the wellbeing of every American.

Every year since the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, the World Health Organization has released a list of infectious diseases that its experts believe are especially high-risk. These global health risks could turn into epidemics or are diseases for which there are no treatments, cures, or vaccines. This list includes diseases we are all too familiar with, like Ebola, Zika, and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). It also includes those that many may not have heard of like Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever and the Nipah virus.

As we learned with the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, patient zero can board a flight from the far reaches of the globe and be in the United States within less than 24 hours. We live in a global society, where travel is a vital part of economic opportunity. We no longer live in a world where global health is separated from America’s health. That is why it is critical to ensure that we are in a position to protect Americans from threats – both at home and abroad.

Over the past four years, the Labor/HHS Subcommittee has focused substantial resources in doing just that – ensuring our nation’s public health system can respond to a threat in the United States as well as responding overseas before it reaches our shoreline.

The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases has a budget of over \$5.5 billion to lead research to understand, treat, and prevent infectious disease. In recent Labor/HHS bills, we have focused increased investment toward antibiotic resistance research and developing a universal flu vaccine. NIAID is also a vital part of our ongoing response to the current outbreak of Ebola in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

As the nation’s health protection agency, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention saves lives and protects people from health and security threats. We have strengthened CDC’s nation-wide system of laboratories and invested in a new \$480 million biosecurity laboratory. We also provide nearly \$700 million every year for the Public Health Emergency Preparedness grants, which are distributed to every state to strengthen their capabilities to respond to public health threats.

These U.S. based investments are complemented by investments made abroad, including the nearly \$700 million we provided in the past four years to CDC for the Global Health Security Agenda (GHSA). GHSA is designed to help build developing countries' capacities to predict, prevent, and respond to infectious disease outbreaks before they reach the United States.

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response is the lead response agency to protect Americans from health security threats. Now the lead agency supporting the Strategic National Stockpile, the Committee provides \$610 million annually to maintain a repository of antibiotics, vaccines, and other critical medical supplies. Further, the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority supports the transition of vaccines, treatments, and diagnostic tests from research and development to deployment.

These three agencies of the Department of Health and Human Services work in concert with USAID, our lead international agency focused on improving global health, to ensure our nation can prepare and respond to emerging and existing health threats. Together, they create the backbone of our nation's health security strategy.

As we continue to prioritize strengthening our public health system while preventing diseases from becoming threats, it is important to point out a recent addition to the WHO infectious disease threat list: Disease X. Disease X is not the name of a newly discovered disease, but a reminder that we need to be ready for the unknown, an infectious disease we have never thought of. What happens when a disease mutates like we saw with the Zika virus? How do we understand, but more importantly try to predict, the risk a new disease may bring? What do we do during outbreaks of rare infectious diseases like the polio-like disease, AFM? How do we respond when there is no diagnostic test, treatment, or cure for a disease?

Adding Disease X to the threat list was a warning by the WHO to stay vigilant. As outbreaks like Zika illustrate, we need to monitor where emerging infections are, where they go, how they develop, and who may be most at risk. It is critical to invest not only in robust surveillance efforts at home, but also abroad. Research should focus on the diseases that are threats today and the ones that may be threats tomorrow. We should prioritize infectious disease outbreak response and control efforts. And we must work with both state and global partners to ensure that we can detect infectious disease outbreaks and adequately respond before they turn into a national or global epidemic.

I look forward to today's hearing and the testimonies of our experts to help us better understand and assess the U.S. health security strategy. Thank you.