

**Statement for the Record**  
**by the**  
**American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)**  
**for the Hearing on the**  
**U.S. Government Response: Fighting Ebola and Protecting America**  
**before the**  
**Committee on Appropriations**  
**U.S. Senate**  
**November 12, 2014**

This statement is submitted on behalf of the 1.6 million members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). AFSCME represents workers who are on the front lines of America's domestic response to Ebola, from the New York City Emergency Medical Services (EMS) crew that transported Dr. Craig Spencer to Bellevue Hospital, to laboratory technicians at Harborview Medical Center in Seattle, Washington, to state and local government public health staff monitoring travelers from West Africa to hospital staff across the nation. We strongly support the Administration's request for emergency Ebola funding. It advances our national health security against this current outbreak of Ebola through a two prong approach of domestic and international efforts which focus on public health infrastructure and international capacity.

Germs have no national boundaries. AFSCME agrees with public health experts that we will improve overall global health security by building immediate and long-term capacity in Africa to contain and diminish the epidemic through medical and public health infrastructures.

**Strong, Stable Public Health Systems are a Critical First Line of Defense**

It is a core and inherent government role to protect our nation from the threats of infectious diseases. No matter where they live in our country, all Americans have the right to basic protections. A strong, stable public health system at the national, state and local level is fundamental to the ability of our nation to detect, control and respond rapidly to infectious diseases and prevent epidemics. Public health departments around the country have this unique role and responsibility. Together with our health care system, these workforces are the first line of defense against emerging infectious threats.

The single most important resource for public health departments are people-- trained and experienced workers. But efforts to prevent and control infectious diseases are vulnerable because we have let our guard down by cutting staff and reducing capacity. For example, Maryland's public health lab reported not having a plan or capability to handle a significant surge in testing over a six to eight week period in response to an outbreak that increases testing over 300%. Since 2008, cuts to federal funding for public health preparedness have meant the loss of 1 in 5 state and local public health jobs. That loss of 51,000 workers has left states, counties and cities less ready and able to respond to the predictable, annual outbreak of influenza, much less emerging infectious disease threats. We support the Administration's emergency request to provide funds to improve state and local public health departments and

laboratories and to increase monitoring of travelers, as well as the purchase of needed equipment to protect workers. This emergency funding will help state and local governments fulfill their unique role in protecting our nation.

### **Protecting Workers on the Front Lines Keeps our Health System Functioning and Protects the Public**

To protect the American public we must protect those on the front lines, health care workers, EMS and other workers who are at higher risk of being exposed to the Ebola virus (and other infectious diseases) when they do their job. Protecting workers is the best way to protect the public from exposure. The transmission of the Ebola virus to nurses in Dallas shines a spotlight on the cracks in our system of protecting workers. Workers across the nation who are at high risk deserve better. They deserve training and practice on the use of necessary personal protective equipment (PPE). Moreover, Americans will be less alarmed when they know workers are being protected from exposure and less likely to become transmitters of disease.

The experience with Dr. Spencer in New York City shows it is possible to have a well-honed system of worker protections. New York City's Fire Department's Bureau of Emergency Medical Service, in partnership with AFSCME Local 2507, developed protocols for transporting potential Ebola patients to the hospital. Only specially protected and trained EMS workers will treat and transport suspected Ebola virus patients. These procedures reflect a strong commitment to public safety, worker protections and ongoing training. For the protocols to be effective, communication and administrative coordination with 911 operators, the local health department and hospital system is required.

In New York City, a specially trained HAZ TAC team does the transport using a fully encapsulated and fluid resistant suit with a hood and gloves, an additional pair of nitrile gloves, and a powered air purifying respirator (PAPR). Once the transport is completed the workers go through a special procedure to remove their personal protective equipment and then a special separate team conducts the decontamination process. This protocol also includes monitoring EMS workers for an increase in temperature. Because of extensive training and compliance with the protocols, the EMS workers who transported Dr. Spencer did not have a breach in their protective equipment and had no exposure to Ebola. Though a model to be emulated, these protocols are a strain on the City's emergency preparedness resources.

AFSCME supports the Administration's emergency request for the Hospital Preparedness Program (HPP) and to support 50 Ebola Treatment Centers. Funding for HPP has dropped from \$515 million in FY 2004 to \$255 million in FY 2014. We must restore funding to ensure hospitals are meeting their obligations to patients, providers, other workers and the community. This challenge can help us prepare for the next and unknown threat by ensuring an effective infrastructure and ensuring that workers called to respond know that measures are in place to reduce their risk of exposure.

AFSCME supports the Administration's emergency funding request to help state and local government agencies and hospitals purchase the needed level of personal protective equipment. As we have seen from the photos of health care workers and the experience in New York City, the protective equipment is elaborate, expensive and necessary.

We urge Congress and the Administration to hold accountable, those entities that receive federal taxpayer dollars for this emergency funding. Uniform compliance with Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines and existing required worker health and safety procedures will reduce the spread of Ebola virus. Even the best guidelines fail to protect workers and the public they serve when employers do not provide front line staff with training or fail to comply rigorously with protective procedures. We support the Administration's request to ensure taxpayer dollars are used properly to control the spread of the Ebola virus.

We support the Administration's emergency request for funds to help support training. There remains a need for additional targeted training funds to ensure that, hospital workers, first responders and others who are at risk of occupational exposure, are trained. We ask that Congress provide targeted funds through existing mechanisms including the National Institute of Health's National Institute of Environmental Health Services which provides funds for HazMat Safety & Training. This specialized NIH program can help invest in needed training for the development of emergency response teams that can respond to any emerging public health crisis, such as Ebola.

We also urge Congress and the Administration to support resources for agencies focused on worker health and safety protection to evaluate compliance with these guidelines and required procedures.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the tragic wake-up call of 911, the outbreak of H1N1 and avian flu our public health system is not ready for the challenge of Ebola or any public health crisis. The budget sequester and other funding cuts to state and local governments have harmed our public health infrastructure. Years of cuts have meant losses in experienced and trained public health staff.

AFSCME urges the Congress to support the President's emergency funding request of \$6.18 billion, to fight Ebola abroad and respond to it here at home. Protecting the workers who will be on the front line of this fight must be a top priority. Health and safety standards and CDC guidelines must be followed and enforced. Protective equipment must be available and all workers who may be exposed, including doctors and nurses, paramedics, lab technicians and custodians, must be trained to reduce their risk of infection.