

January 29, 2016

Secretary Sylvia Mathews Burwell
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Burwell,

I write to you out of concern regarding the ongoing Zika virus outbreak and its impact in the Americas, Samoa, and Cape Verde, especially on pregnant women and children. According to the World Health Organization, the Zika virus is now “spreading explosively” through the Americas and has been reported in 23 countries. While local transmission of the disease has not yet been reported in the continental United States, 31 travel-related Zika infections have been documented in 11 states and the District of Columbia. This is in addition to 19 cases in Puerto Rico and one in the U.S. Virgin Islands due to domestic transmission. In the Americas, it is anticipated that the outbreak could infect up to 4 million people. Because Zika is carried by low-moisture dwelling mosquitos, local transmission is predicted to spread to all countries and territories where the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito is found, including the United States. There is a critical and urgent need for a robust and coordinated response at all levels.

Zika virus presents serious health threats to pregnant women and their unborn children. When contracted by pregnant women, Zika virus has been linked with microcephaly, a serious birth defect that can confer long-term neurocognitive consequences, including developmental delay, problems with vision, hearing, or speech, and epilepsy in children. It is critical that we better understand the nature of the link between the virus and microcephaly, as well as other potential negative pregnancy and public health outcomes. Further, only one in five infected persons demonstrates any symptoms of Zika, meaning many pregnant women could become infected and potentially risk serious birth defects without their knowledge. This makes increased education for providers and patients all the more critical to ensure that women have increased awareness of the risks associated with travel and the virus. Other potential outcomes of Zika virus, such as Guillain-Barré Syndrome, a rare disorder which can lead to paralysis and may be caused by Zika infection, demand further investigation in order to fully understand and respond to the evolving threat.

It is imperative that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) be equipped to coordinate and lead a robust public health response across federal, state, and global partners to both prevent and respond to the spread of this dangerous virus.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) both play critical roles in this response. CDC has already recommended that all pregnant women avoid traveling to infected areas, and urged screening for those who may have been exposed. CDC's ongoing work with health care providers is particularly important to ensuring pregnant women and families have access to key information about the potential impacts of Zika, supporting providers in state and federal programs, and expanding public education about this global health crisis. The agency's work with domestic and international partners must leverage the full range of CDC's public health expertise as it relates to both infectious disease and birth defects, as we continue to learn more about the spread and impacts of Zika virus.

In addition to these critical public health efforts, HHS must accelerate work on effective diagnostics, treatments, and preventative vaccines. We know that NIH's current work on flaviviruses – a family of viruses that includes diseases such as dengue and West Nile, in addition to Zika – may hold promise in developing key tools to combat this dangerous virus.

I urge you to ensure HHS and its agencies are doing everything possible to ensure a robust and timely public health response and ask that you make me aware of any additional tools or resources needed to bolster your critical effort.

Thank you for your efforts to prevent Zika and please keep me abreast of any developments.

Sincerely,

Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions