



## **OPEN LETTER TO THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES FROM TRUST FOR AMERICA'S HEALTH**

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**Washington, DC, February 9, 2004** -- The following is an open letter sent to all major candidates for the U.S. presidency from Trust for America's Health:

Dear Candidate:

Of the many duties of the President of the United States none is more sacred than protecting the safety and health of the American people.

That mission has never been more important than it is today.

The attacks of September 11 and the anthrax killings that followed alerted America to the danger our nation faces from terrorists armed with biological, chemical or radiological weapons. Sadly, we are once again reminded that chemical threats still lurk, with the recent ricin scare in the U.S. Senate.

In recent years, we have also seen the resurgence of another threat that is no less lethal: infectious diseases, which, if left unchallenged, could become pandemics endangering the lives of millions of Americans.

Preventing -- and combating -- these and other health hazards is the job of our public health system. As Americans we have long taken special pride that our nation has set the pace for disease prevention and control worldwide. But America's public health system is now being stretched to the breaking point.

In fact, even as it's being given new responsibilities in the War on Terrorism, our public health system is still struggling to meet its crucial peace time commitments.

Protecting the nation's health is of broad concern to all Americans. Unfortunately, our nation's public health system has been neglected and under-resourced for the past two decades or more.

The non-partisan Trust for America's Health believes that modernizing and strengthening our nation's public health system is fundamental to protecting American lives. We are not alone. Recent opinion research sponsored by our organization and the American Cancer Society revealed that a majority of Americans believe that investing in public health is vital to improving homeland security.

We are writing to express our appreciation to you for your past commitment to promoting public health and to share with you the priorities we see facing our nation today and in the future. We are convinced that the most urgent public health concerns facing America are as follows:

- Over the course of the last several years outbreaks of SARS, West Nile virus, influenza and other infectious diseases have claimed American lives and raised doubts about the preparedness of our public health system. Trust for America's Health is encouraging a strong and coordinated policy for preventing and controlling infectious disease threats.
- Although seven out of 10 U.S. deaths are due to largely preventable chronic diseases, many prevention efforts have been reduced. Beyond the human suffering, chronic diseases cost our nation \$750 billion annually. We believe the time is right for proactive strategies for reducing chronic diseases among the American people, including implementation of a nationwide health-tracking network.
- Americans look to our federal government to guarantee that our nation's food supply is safe and wholesome. Recent outbreaks of Hepatitis A, E. coli and Mad Cow are a sobering reminder of the vulnerabilities in America's food safety system. We support efforts to strengthen the U.S. food safety system.
- A wide spectrum of diseases, including asthma, heart disease, and many forms of cancer, have been linked to air pollution, water pollution or other exposure to pollutants and toxic substances. Often those Americans at greatest risk of contracting diseases from these dangers are infants and young children. We support policies that reduce community exposure to toxic chemicals and other public health hazards.
- Last year the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention noted that America had made progress in the effort to reduce health disparities between men and women and various racial and ethnic groups. However, profound disparities remain. Members of minority groups in America suffer an infant mortality rate far higher than white Americans and are more likely to die from cancer, heart disease, HIV and other health risks. We support efforts to eliminate health disparities in America.
- A study released by our organization in December reported that the capacity of states to respond to bioterrorism and other large public health emergencies has improved since the September 11 attacks and the anthrax killings, but needs additional support to help address the under-investments in public health over the past two or more decades. We advocate continued efforts to improve the readiness of state and local public health agencies to respond to terrorism and other emergencies.

Clearly, it is time to make public health a national priority. For this reason, Trust for America's Health believes that a White House summit should be convened in 2005 to create a vision for a 21<sup>st</sup> century public health system. With presidential leadership, and input from experts across public health disciplines, we are convinced a White House summit could lay the needed groundwork for revitalizing America's public health system to meet the nation's current and emerging health threats. At the same time, this summit could foster a national dialogue about the resources required to implement these changes and expand accountability at every level of America's public health system.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Shelley A. Hearne

Executive Director

Trust for America's Health

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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.*