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Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member
on
Ready or Not: Protection the Public's Health in an Age of Bioterrorism
December 11, 2003

This report identifies serious gaps in our public health infrastructure. These gaps must be addressed before we are truly prepared for a public health disaster, be it a terrorist attack or a naturally occurring flu pandemic. After 9/11, there was hope that the focus on bioterror preparedness activities would also improve core public health capabilities. Unfortunately, what this report shows us is that due to fiscal crises, many states are actually reducing their support for these critical public health programs. As we face what may be one of the worst flu seasons in decades, it is dismaying to learn that only 13 states have a draft or final plan for responding to a flu pandemic — and that even CDC has yet to release its flu pandemic plan.

This report also suggests that the Administration has lost sight of the forest for the trees. While the President pushed a very expensive, laborious program to vaccinate 500,000 first responders against smallpox, most states have not yet achieved an adequate level of preparedness to provide emergency vaccines and antidotes. This level of preparedness would be critical in order to deal with a smallpox attack, an anthrax attack, or even a flu pandemic.

This report should spur congressional hearings to investigate gaps in the public health infrastructure and what can be done to fix them. I support the call for a national summit to set strategy and funding goals for the future of our public health system's basic functions.