

Chairwoman Yvette D. Clarke (D-NY)

Opening Statement, as prepared

Subcommittee on Emerging Threats, Cybersecurity, & Science and
Technology
Committee on Homeland Security

*Hearing: “Real-Time Assessment of the Federal Response to
Pandemic Influenza”*

October 27, 2009 2pm Cannon 311

The Homeland Security Committee has long been concerned with the state of our preparedness to deal with pandemics. Today, our Subcommittee turns its attention to the Federal response to the re-emerging threat of pandemic influenza.

Over the weekend, President Obama declared a National Emergency with respect to the 2009 H1N1 Influenza Pandemic. This action underscored the gravity of the situation.

Although we went into this pandemic better prepared than we had been in the past, we were not fully prepared to meet the pandemic when it started this year.

Going into this pandemic, we knew that:

- Our early warning and detection systems were inadequate;
- Some key planning activities were incomplete;
- We didn't have a good approach to provide health care under pandemic conditions; and
- Levels of preparedness for pandemic influenza were unclear.

Unfortunately, our failure to develop these systems, activities, and policies cost us during the response.

For instance:

- The pandemic started in North America – the one place we were not looking for it;
- We did not have early warning – the alarm sounded only when people started to die;
- We did not have the luxury of time to observe the virus before the pandemic started; and
- And to the surprise of the community, the virus turned out to be H1N1 – not the H5N1 virus that causes avian influenza.

We have made it through the first phase of the pandemic and are now entering the second.

The Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Health and Human Services are leading our Federal response efforts. It is clear that DHS Secretary Napolitano and HHS Secretary Sebelius have set the tone for responding to this pandemic with their strong leadership and commitment to the Nation. We commend them and you.

But the pandemic has shown us where our public health security infrastructure is weak – in the same way that natural disasters show us where our physical infrastructures are vulnerable.

The pandemic has shown us that we need to improve:

- Biosurveillance;
- Pandemic disaster assistance;
- Real-time recording of lessons learned;
- Public messaging; and
- The security of our pharmaceutical system.

In these areas, I believe that:

- The National Biosurveillance Integration Center needs more information and participation;
- The FEMA Disaster Assistance Policy on pandemic human influenza needs to be updated;
- The DHS Lessons Learned Information Sharing system needs to be better utilized;
- Influenza messaging needs to be de-conflicted and clear; and
- Our pharmaceutical system needs to be better secured against the introduction of counterfeits.

Our Federal Departments and agencies should be commended for positive steps forward. Indeed, some systemic improvements have already been made:

- Communication between and among countries has improved – I am pretty sure that the US knows more about what is going on in Mexico and Canada now than it did before, and vice versa;
- Communication between and among agencies has improved – for example, the Department of Health and Human Services is not putting out guidance on school closures without first consulting with the Department of Education;
- More guidance – regarding personal protective equipment, school closures, and high-risk groups needing vaccination – has been provided;
- Some additional plans – particularly response plans – have been finalized and communicated;
- The H1N1 vaccine has been developed and what we have been able to produce of it is beginning to be distributed;
- The DHS Lessons Learned Information Sharing system has shifted from gathering information from exercises to collecting some real-time information; and
- Law enforcement agencies are specifically addressing the threat of H1N1-related counterfeit pharmaceuticals through such entities as the Intellectual Property Rights Coordination Center.

But we still have work to do. We now have the obligation to strengthen at least some of the weaknesses in our National response. To do that, we in Congress need concrete information from you – and your Departments and agencies need concrete recommendations and resources from us. The Legislative and Executive Branches must work together to improve our response efforts and save as many lives as we can during this pandemic.