



COMMITTEE ON  
**ENERGY & COMMERCE**  
DEMOCRATS  
RANKING MEMBER FRANK PALLONE, JR.

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Pallone Remarks at Biopreparedness Hearing**

**Washington, D.C.** – *Energy and Commerce Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ) delivered the following opening remarks today at a Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing on “The State of U.S. Public Health Biopreparedness: Responding to Biological Attacks, Pandemics, and Emerging Disease Outbreaks:”*

Ensuring that our nation is equipped to respond to pandemics, natural disasters, and the accidental or intentional release of toxins is a key part of protecting public health. Past work by this Committee has suggested that our nation has not always been as prepared as we need to be, so I am glad that we are having this hearing today. I hope to hear that we have made tangible progress towards increasing our nation’s preparedness.

In 2015, the Blue Ribbon Panel on Biodefense conducted a comprehensive review of the federal government’s biopreparedness efforts. The Panel found that, quote, “the Nation is dangerously vulnerable to a biological event.” It produced an extensive report recommending 30 “action items” for our public health infrastructure to address.

While the Blue Ribbon panel was the most recent high-level commission to examine our nation’s biopreparedness, it was not the first. In fact, for many years, experts have warned that our ability to respond to biologic and other emerging threats must be improved.

These recommendations remain important today, because the emerging health threats this country faces continue to grow. Just this week, officials announced that a child in Idaho had contracted bubonic plague. Last year, an outbreak of this plague killed 200 people in Madagascar. In March, we heard at a hearing that the threat of pandemic flu is among the greatest concerns in the public health world.

Antibiotic resistance also poses a major threat to public health, killing 23,000 Americans every year and making everyday procedures like surgery and chemotherapy increasingly risky. In May, a study showed that warming temperatures are associated with higher levels of antibiotic resistance in common strains of bacteria.

Extreme weather events can also lead to serious public health emergencies. The hurricanes in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Texas and Florida last year were a stark reminder of this fact.

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We must be prepared to address threats from all of these sources. The Blue Ribbon panel produced many recommendations for improving our biopreparedness, and I hope our witnesses will show that we have made real progress. For example, I hope to hear that the agencies have established a plan for who will take the lead in response to a public health threat, and how the efforts of will be coordinated.

Along these same lines, I hope we will learn how CDC, NIH, ASPR, and FDA are working together to identify the greatest threats, and to prioritize the research, surveillance, and response capabilities needed to target these threats.

We must also focus on how these agencies collaborate with state and local health departments as well as healthcare providers, such as hospitals. These entities are likely to be the first to see patients impacted by an infectious disease outbreak or other incident. In most cases, they will be the ones to dispense countermeasures and to treat those impacted.

In 2014, for example, we witnessed the negative consequences that ensued when our health care infrastructure was underprepared to diagnose and treat patients with Ebola. A hospital failed to detect the disease in a patient in Dallas, and that patient later transmitted Ebola to two health care workers.

This incident led to serious questions about whether we would be able to handle a larger scale event or incident. We must make sure everyone on the ground has all the resources they need to respond effectively in such a crisis.

I also want to hear more about how we are conducting surveillance so that when an outbreak happens or a toxin is released, we know as soon as possible. While we cannot anticipate every possible new or mutated pathogen, if we can quickly detect when such a pathogen has emerged, we can respond much more effectively. Along these same lines, I understand that CDC is gathering a substantial amount of data from laboratories, public health departments, and clinicians across the country every day. We must ensure that this agency has the resources it needs to effectively use and analyze this data as it comes in.

Finally, I want to hear more about what we are doing to prioritize development of medical countermeasures to help us respond to a biosafety incident. Countermeasures include preventive measures like vaccines, as well as therapeutics like antibiotics and antivirals. BARDA, I understand that you work closely with the private sector to develop many of these products. I hope that we will hear today about how these partnerships have produced useful, safe and effective products that truly address the challenges we face.

I would like to again thank our panelists for being here today. Preparing for these threats is not easy, but I am confident that you are up for the task, as long as we do our part and provide you with all the resources that you need.

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