



COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY & COMMERCE
DEMOCRATS
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Pallone: Cuts to Medicaid Intensify Zika Threat

Washington, D.C. – *Energy and Commerce Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ) delivered the following opening remarks at an Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee hearing titled, “U.S. Public Health Response to the Zika Virus: Continuing Challenges:”*

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to all our witnesses for joining us this morning to discuss the federal government’s preparations for the 2017 Zika season.

I look forward to hearing from our panelists today about how they believe the Zika virus will spread in 2017, what they anticipate the upcoming mosquito season will look like, what challenges remain, and what additional resources they need to do their job.

In March of 2016, this Committee held a hearing to examine the federal government’s response to the spreading Zika threat. Since then, we have learned a great deal more about this virus. For example, scientific consensus now indicates that Zika infection in mothers during pregnancy can cause microcephaly in newborns, a severe birth defect of the brain.

As we will hear from GAO today, although CDC and FDA took steps to respond to the unique challenges posed by the Zika outbreak last year, there remains room for improvement. This is particularly true regarding our ability to predict the spread of Zika, to better coordinate and control mosquito populations at the local level, and to more rapidly develop diagnostic tests for detecting Zika infection.

These steps to improve preparedness should also go hand-in-hand with strengthening our health care programs. We must ensure that individuals affected by Zika, particularly pregnant women and children born with microcephaly, have access to ongoing screening and health services.

An integral part of that effort is the Medicaid program. Medicaid provides contraceptive services to help prevent Zika infection, and diagnostic services to detect infection. Medicaid is also a vital source of care for children born with special health care needs, like microcephaly. Today, Medicaid covers 1 in 3 children in the United States.

The President's budget is expected within the hour, and there are reports that he plans to propose slashing Medicaid by over \$800 billion. This would decimate the Medicaid program and endanger our ability to manage public health emergencies like Zika.

I also remain concerned about the status of Medicaid funding in Puerto Rico. As everyone in this room understands, Zika has wreaked havoc upon Puerto Rico. Yet, as we head into the 2017 mosquito season, funding for Puerto Rico's Medicaid program through the Affordable Care Act is on track to be exhausted as early as this October.

And despite the \$295 million allocated for Medicaid funding in Puerto Rico as part of the recent Continuing Resolution, up to 900,000 people remain at risk of losing their health coverage at the end of this year.

In short, a strong public health infrastructure is often one of the best tools to fight epidemics, and Medicaid is an essential component in protecting us from threats such as Zika. Fighting Zika will not be easy, but the first step should be to maintain critical health services for those who may be affected and provide agencies with the resources they will need to respond to an outbreak.

I'm concerned about recent reports that nearly 700 positions at CDC are vacant because of the ongoing hiring freeze, and that federal support to states for Zika response may be discontinued. That is why Democratic Members of this Committee sent a [letter to CDC](#) last week asking whether the agency has sufficient funding to prepare and respond to Zika this year. It is critical that we give these agencies the tools they need to bolster our preparedness.

Let me conclude by saying thank you to the agencies before us today who work on a daily basis to fight this disease.

Thank you, and I yield back.

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