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DeGette Remarks at Hearing on Preparedness and Response Efforts to Seasonal Influenza

Washington, DC – *Oversight and Investigations Ranking Member Diana DeGette (D-CO) delivered the following opening remarks today at a Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing on “Examining U.S. Public Health Preparedness for and Response Efforts to Seasonal Influenza”*

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for convening this important hearing. This is a bipartisan issue, and I look forward to finding areas where we can work together on preparing our nation against this threat.

Flu preparedness and response is incredibly important, and the Committee has a long history of addressing this issue. We have held seven hearings on flu preparedness since 2004. Most recently, in 2015, we held two hearings after the country was hit with a particularly severe 2014-15 flu season in which the H3N2-strain of flu predominated.

This year, we are again experiencing a severe flu season caused by H3N2. It has been a stark reminder of just how serious the flu can be.

Hospitalizations have been high throughout the country, and 114 children have died.

As an example, my home state, Colorado, has set two records this year, with nearly 4,000 people hospitalized due to flu, and 160 flu outbreaks in long term care facilities.

I am troubled by the news that this year’s flu vaccine was only 36 percent effective, although I realize that this number is different for different age groups.

I want to hear from our witnesses today about what “36 percent effective” means, and what research must be done to help our seasonal flu vaccine offer more protection.

I understand that FDA's vaccine advisory committee actually just met to make recommendations for next year's vaccine. I hope that FDA will tell us how data on this year's vaccine effectiveness helped to inform decision for next year.

I also hope that we will hear more about research efforts designed to produce a more broadly protective vaccine, or perhaps even a universal vaccine that can target all strains of flu.

I know that the flu virus is particularly hard to vaccinate against, but I also know that we have some of the brightest minds in the country working on this issue.

I am sure that I echo the thoughts of many of my colleagues when I say that work towards better vaccine must be a priority for our public health agencies.

As our witnesses will remind us today, though, even a vaccine with a low effectiveness rate will still protect millions from getting sick. The flu vaccine remains the best tool we have to protect as many people as possible.

Only around forty percent of Americans received a flu shot this year. This number has not changed from the last time we had a flu hearing, in 2015. We can and must do better, and I hope that our witnesses today are prepared to discuss concrete steps that we can take to increase vaccination rates in this country.

We also must work towards better treatment methods, in particular more effective antiviral medications, so that people who do become sick can be cared for before their illness becomes more serious.

I hope that our witnesses today will describe the new drugs in the pipeline. I also hope that they are prepared to address the spot shortages we saw this past season, which may have prevented some individuals from being treated as quickly as they otherwise might have been.

Finally, the importance of a strong public health infrastructure that allows us to prepare and respond cannot be overstated.

Because of the critical work of our federal and state public health experts, we are in a good position, but there is always more work to be done. We need coordinated response capabilities, effective communication strategies, and critical investments so we can strengthen our response to seasonal flu.

I look forward to hearing about how far we have come and what more needs to be done to strengthen our national preparedness.

Mr. Chairman, let me conclude by acknowledging and thanking the witnesses and the agencies before us today. We are fortunate to have your talent on the frontlines in the ongoing fight against infectious diseases, including influenza.

We should thank you by ensuring that you always have the tools and resources you need to remain on the cutting edge of science and preparedness, and I hope you can tell us what you need going forward.

I look forward to working together to move the country toward better flu preparedness.

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