

Opening Statement of the Honorable Fred Upton
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Hearing on “Examining the U.S. Public Health Response to the Ebola Outbreak”
October 16, 2014

(As Prepared for Delivery)

Let me begin by thanking our witnesses and all of the Members, Republicans and Democrats, for being here today. It's unusual to convene a hearing in Washington during a district work period, but on this issue, there's no time to wait. I was likewise glad to see President Obama get off the campaign trail to finally focus on this crisis.

People are scared. We need all hands on deck. We need a strategy. We need to protect the American people, first and foremost. This is not a drill – a fact that the doctors and nurses working on the front lines understand. People's lives are at stake, and the response so far has been unacceptable.

As Chairman of this committee, I want to assure the witnesses that we stand ready to support you in any way to keep Americans safe, but we are going to hold your feet to the fire on getting the job done, and getting it done right. Both the United States and the global health community have so far failed to put in place an effective strategy fast enough to combat the current outbreak.

Just the other day the CDC admitted more could have been done in Texas. Two health care workers have become infected with Ebola even as nurses and other medical personnel suggest that protocols are being “developed on the fly.” And none of us can understand how a nurse who treated an Ebola-infected patient, and who herself had developed a fever, was permitted to board a commercial airline and fly across the country.

It's no wonder the public's confidence is shaken. Over a month ago, before Ebola reached our shores, we wrote to Health and Human Services Secretary Sylvia Burwell seeking details for the preparedness and response plan here at home and abroad. It's clear whatever plan was in place was insufficient, but I believe we can and must do better now.

We need a plan to treat those who are sick, to train health workers to safely provide care, and to stop the spread of this disease here at home and at its source in Africa. This includes travel restrictions from that region beginning today. Surely we can find other ways to get the aid workers and supplies in to these countries. From terrorist watch lists to quarantines, there are tools used to manage air travel to assure public safety. Why not here? We can no longer be reacting to each day's crisis. We need to be aggressive and finally get ahead of this outbreak.

The American people also want to know that our troops and medical personnel who are courageously headed to Africa to treat the sick will be protected. We want to know that health care workers here in America have the training and resources necessary to safely combat this threat.

This is not just the responsibility of the United States. The global health community bears the charge to finally get ahead of this threat, develop a clear strategy, train all those who are involved in combating this disease, and eradicate this threat.

We have all heard the grave warnings that this will get worse before it gets better, and folks are scared. It is our responsibility to ensure that the government is doing whatever it takes to keep the public safe. Diana DeGette and I have partnered together on the 21st Century Cures initiative to help improve the research and speed the approval of life-saving medicines and treatments, and while much attention has been paid to how this effort can help with diseases like cancer and diabetes, these same reforms can also help in the development of treatments for deadly infections like Ebola. We are all partners in this effort to save lives.

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