
EDUCATION & LABOR COMMITTEE

Congressman George Miller, Chairman

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**Chairman Miller Statement at Committee Hearing On
“Ensuring Preparedness Against the Flu Virus at School and
Work”**

WASHINGTON, D.C. – *Below are the prepared remarks of U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-CA), chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, for a committee hearing on “Ensuring Preparedness Against the Flu Virus at School and Work.”*

Good morning. Welcome to today’s hearing on “Ensuring preparedness against the flu virus at school and work.”

Just a couple weeks ago, international health organizations began warning of the potential of a pandemic outbreak of the H1N1 flu virus.

To date, the Center for Disease Control has confirmed 642 cases of H1N1 in the United States in over 40 states, and two deaths, including the first adult death.

Under President Obama’s steady leadership, our government is acting decisively, responsibly and aggressively to control the virus and prevent undue alarm.

On Tuesday, after more than 545 school closings that affected over 341,000 children and almost 21,000 teachers and staff, officials announced that schools no longer need to close due to confirmed cases of swine flu.

That is good news.

However, officials still expect the virus to reach all 50 states within days, and experts predict that H1N1 or another flu pandemic may hit harder and stronger by fall.

In addition to its public health and safety risks, this pandemic has also highlighted how transmissible diseases can affect a school, a workplace, and families – including both their physical and financial health.

As we look forward, we have an obligation to examine how this unpredictable outbreak has challenged schools, childcare centers, colleges and workplaces. In many cases, our morphing public health needs simply don’t align with our education and business needs.

Today's hearing will give us a critical opportunity to look at these challenges while they're fresh and what lessons we can learn to prepare for future pandemics.

This outbreak has proven that a pandemic can have a ripple effect on our communities.

Many schools are still shut but are preparing to re-open. Colleges and child care programs have also shut down.

These closures don't just affect the students, teachers, and other staff – but families, coworkers, and surrounding communities.

Parents have to scramble to find last-minute child-care arrangements for their kids – or take off work.

Teachers and faculty have to figure out how to maintain student learning in the face of closures.

School districts, childcare facilities and colleges have to coordinate closely with public health officials to make sound decisions about suspected or confirmed flu cases.

It's a delicate balancing act between taking necessary safety precautions without over-reacting or igniting panic.

There is also no one coordinated system for reporting cases in schools. Education agencies are currently tracking information through county health officials, the CDC and news reports – but there are no specific reporting requirements for districts.

As a result, agencies may not have the most complete information about what's happening on the ground. State education and health agencies have a role to play here.

The ripple effect is evident in workplaces too.

Both employers and workers have questions about how to protect themselves, their families, their businesses, and their jobs in the event of a flu outbreak.

While the Occupational Safety and Health Administration has issued guidance and even has some specific standards relevant to pandemic flu, OSHA does not have a mandatory standard that comprehensively addresses the workplace hazards posed by airborne transmissible diseases.

Ensuring that appropriate standards are in place and are being followed is especially critical in the highest risk workplaces: Health care facilities.

If nurses, doctors, and other health care workers get sick, they can't treat flu victims or anyone else.

If they believe their workplace is unsafe, they may stay home out of their own fear of contracting a virus.

Sufficient worker protections must be in place to ensure that our health care system has the capacity to deal with widespread viral outbreaks.

But our concern is not limited to the health care workplace.

We want to know what measures businesses in general are and should be taking to prepare for pandemic outbreaks.

For example, one critical issue that employers face is how to deal with sick employees.

In this economy, workers are less likely to take time off for fear of losing pay, benefits, or even their job. In the context of a pandemic, having the right leave policies becomes a matter of public health.

It is becoming increasingly clear that current federal sick leave requirements aren't designed to address pandemics.

Current federal law covers only some workers. It doesn't require paid leave to ensure sick workers stay home. And it doesn't cover situations where a working parent has child care problems due to a school closure.

We also need to examine what other preventative actions employers and employees should be taking, like providing training on flu prevention, and what businesses can do to keep operating if a pandemic hits.

These challenges are acute, and they won't go away.

Experts predict the likelihood of pandemics will increase.

Our federal policies will need to adapt.

On the education front, Secretary Duncan and the CDC have been in frequent communication with school districts and parents to provide critical advice.

The CDC is also currently in the process of reviewing its guidelines to help schools better prepare for and respond to outbreaks.

On the workplace front, under its new leadership, OSHA is looking at how it can improve its health and safety rules and guidance to address flu pandemic protocol.

We'll learn more about these efforts from our panel.

Especially in this economy, it's critical to ensure that students can keep learning and businesses can keep providing services to communities.

I'd like to thank all of our witnesses for taking time out from the vital work you're doing to fight this pandemic to join us today.

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