

**OPENING STATEMENT
CHAIRMAN EDOLPHUS TOWNS
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND
GOVERNMENT REFORM**

**“The Administration’s Flu Vaccine Program:
Health, Safety, and Distribution”**

September 29, 2009

Good afternoon, and thank you for being here today.

This past March, a novel strain of H1N1 influenza, commonly known as “swine flu,” was reported in Mexico. Several people died and the virus spread quickly. Just three months later, in June, the World Health Organization declared this strain of swine flu to be a pandemic, the first global pandemic declared since 1968.

According to the CDC, by the end of August, this new virus had spread throughout the U.S., resulting in more than 9,000 hospitalizations and over 600 deaths.

At first, some scientists feared that this could be a pandemic disaster on the scale of the Hong Kong Flu of 1957, or worse, the Spanish Flu of 1918. At this point, however, it appears to pose much less of a threat. Nevertheless, there is great uncertainty about the course of this flu. And it is this very uncertainty that I think concerns people most.

If there is any good news, it is that so far, this flu strain has not caused the numbers of deaths that some had feared. But why? What did the experts see then that they are not seeing today and what does this foretell regarding how this virus may behave? Although dangerous mutations have not yet occurred, is this still a

possibility? What do the experts expect and what do the best assessments now suggest?

Public health officials believe that vaccination is the best means to protect against this flu. We understand that a vaccine has been approved and is in production. But ever since the swine flu vaccine fiasco of the late Seventies, people have been cautious.

Today we want to discuss questions that I believe the public has about the benefits and risks of this new vaccine. We want to understand whether it is necessary, whether it is available, who will get it, and when.

The more information that can be made available regarding these questions, the better the public and other key stakeholders can assess both the risks and benefits of receiving this important vaccine.

With the swine flu virus spreading rapidly, hundreds of thousands of health-care workers—many in my state of New York—are now being required to get flu shots. Concerns have been raised about mandatory immunizations.

I want to carefully examine these concerns today with our witnesses.

Finally, it should be said that no matter how much we try, the current—or an even a more virulent flu strain—may eventually spread to large portions of the population. Should a worst-case scenario occur, are we prepared? What plans does the Administration have for controlling the spread of this flu should it become more virulent? Would there be a need for quarantines and if so under what circumstances? Would they be voluntary or mandatory? Clearly, none of us hope to test such plans, but these are questions of great importance.

In addition, the Chamber of Commerce estimates that during a normal year U.S. businesses lose an average of \$10 billion as a result of the flu. It could be double that this year, and many business that are not adequately prepared may not be able to function given the number of workers that could be absent.

Fortunately, we have the three leading experts on these issues with us today. I welcome all of you and look forward to your testimony.