

House Committee
On Oversight and Government Reform

Opening Statement of
Chairman Edolphus Towns

Hearing Titled: “State and Local Pandemic Preparedness.”

May 20, 2009

Good afternoon and thank you all for being here.

This hearing comes as a dozen schools in New York City are closed due to the H1N1 influenza outbreak. This hearing also comes as New York City – my hometown – suffers its first H1N1 fatality. I would like to begin this hearing by offering my sincere condolences to the family of Assistant Principal Mitchell Wiener, and also to the students, faculty, and staff of Intermediate School 238.

With adequate preparation, our nation responds better to natural emergencies than any country on earth. However, the 9/11 terror attacks and Hurricane Katrina demonstrated the consequences of inadequate planning and preparation.

These events have also taught us that, while national planning is required, it is the State and local public health departments, safety professionals, and first responders who are the most critical to get help to those in immediate need.

Today's hearing will look at the ability of States and local communities to maintain an appropriate level of readiness to respond to a pandemic flu, and how federal authorities can assist them in mounting a sustained and effective response to a pandemic striking the United States.

Unlike a typical natural disaster such as a hurricane or a wildfire, outbreaks of pandemic flu affect all regions of our country virtually at the same time, making regional cooperation impossible. Also, with a pandemic, it is necessary for public

health teams to function 24/7 in a 3 shift pattern for a period of several months. These public health workers must conduct surveillance, lab tests, and treatments while coordinating school closings, surges at hospitals, and the storage and distribution of treatments and vaccines.

Shifting national priorities and the impact of the current economic downturn have lead to budget cuts in health departments across the country. According to the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), 53 percent of local health departments in the State of New York lost staff in 2008 and 40 percent expect to make more layoffs this year. While dealing with budget and workforce challenges, New York has become a focal point of the current H1N1 outbreak.

Nationally, the public health workforce has been recently reduced by over 7000 workers with more reductions expected. Over 85 percent of local health departments reduced their staffs in 2008 and 46 percent are expected to lay off more workers in 2009.

A recent and seemingly prophetic GAO report, published on February 26, 2009, warns of the continued threat of a pandemic as our national priorities move from pandemic preparedness to the economy and other issues.

Current events remind us that a pandemic can strike at any time, and with little warning. Our communities need to stay ready to respond to such a threat. I am hopeful that this hearing will shed light on exactly how prepared we are to respond to a pandemic at the State and local level. I am also hopeful that our witnesses will help us discover what we *all* can do –not just the federal government – to make sure our communities are ready to handle what Mother Nature dishes out.

I want to thank all of our witnesses for appearing here today, and I look forward to hearing their testimony.