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SCHAKOWSKY: SARS EPIDEMIC CLEARLY ILLUSTRATES HOW CRITICAL IT IS FOR THE US TO REINVEST IN THE PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM

WASHINGTON, D.C. - During an Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee hearing on Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) said, *"This epidemic clearly illustrates how critical it is for us to reinvest in our public health system."* □ □

Schakowsky added, *"Because of President Bush's economic policies, an outbreak of SARS or some other infectious disease in the United States would overwhelm an already stressed public health system. Health programs on the local, state, and federal level are already experiencing funding cuts. They are being forced to take on more responsibilities with fewer resources."* □ □

"Now is not the time to cut funding. Now is the time that we invest in our nation's health care systems by increasing funding for trained personnel, adequate laboratories, technology updates, and improved communication networks," she concluded.

Below is the full text of Schakowsky's opening statement:

I want to thank Chairman Greenwood and Ranking Member Deutsch for bringing this important issue before the subcommittee today. □ I also want to thank our witnesses appearing before the committee to discuss their efforts to combat the spread of SARS.

□ SARS has presented a serious public health concern to the international community and it is critical that we learn how to identify, treat, contain, and eradicate this epidemic. □ Fortunately, no one in the United States has died of SARS and the World Health Organization has removed the US from the list of affected countries. □ However, we cannot lull ourselves into complacency. □ We are still vulnerable to a SARS outbreak.

□ My constituents are particularly concerned about a potential outbreak in Illinois. □ After all, O'Hare International Airport is in Chicago and has the great distinction of offering more connections to international cities than any other airport in the world. □ As we know, the majority of people infected with SARS initially contracted the disease on airplanes or in public health settings. □ I am very interested to learn about protocols in place for both airports and public health settings should there be a sudden outbreak of SARS. □

□ I think this epidemic clearly illustrates how critical it is for us to reinvest in our public health system. □ Because of President Bush's economic policies, an outbreak of SARS or some other infectious disease in the United States would overwhelm an already stressed public health system. Health programs on the local, state, and federal level are already

experiencing funding cuts. They are being forced to take on more responsibilities with fewer resources. Now is not the time to cut funding. Now is the time that we invest in our nations health care systems by increasing funding for trained personnel, adequate laboratories, technology updates, and improved communication networks.

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We must take a hard look at the communication systems we have in place in the event of emergencies. I believe it is essential that all health providers, at every level, have access to information. The only way providers can respond in the event of an emergency is to have a public health system capable of rapid and effective communication.

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Another issue before us is the grave threat the President's Medicaid reform poses to our country, one that would be exacerbated in a future public health emergency. If Medicaid is actually overhauled into a block grant, states will have even fewer resources to handle a health emergency than they do today. We must be able to respond quickly and effectively to public health threats, and the Medicaid reform principles on the table would only further undermine these efforts. □ □

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Again, I want to thank our witnesses for coming in today and sharing with us the lessons learned since the initial outbreak and explaining how we can work together in the future to combat the spread of SARS.

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I want to conclude by saying that we should see SARS for what it is. It is an infectious outbreak that we must immediately contain and control. And, it is yet again another wake up call that we need to pay serious attention to our vulnerable public health system. We must infuse our public health system with funding so that we can adequately respond to our country's health care needs.