

JANUARY 22, 2002

SCHAKOWSKY ADDRESSES CHICAGO/COOK COUNTY SESSION ON PUBLIC HEALTH AND BIOTERRORISM

CHICAGO, IL - U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) today addressed the Chicago/Cook County Community Health Council Northeast district legislative breakfast on issues related to public health and bioterrorism. Democratic Leader Dick Gephardt appointed Schakowsky to the Homeland Security Task Force. Members of the Task Force drafted legislation that would provide billions of dollars to states, localities and federal public health and emergency response teams to respond to growing and urgent health needs and security threats.

Below is the full text of Schakowsky's speech.

"Since the morning of September 11, our nation has been rocked by a series of events that have caused previously unimaginable deaths and injuries. We have experienced the physical destruction at the World Trade Center, the crashes of airplanes at the Pentagon and in Pennsylvania, and anthrax attacks from New York to Florida.

"We have learned many lessons. One of those lessons is the need for a vibrant public health care system and for adequate numbers of well-trained medical professionals to respond to health threats. Unfortunately, we have also learned that over the past years we have seriously neglected those needs. As a result, we are not adequately prepared.

"Our public health and medical systems are already operating on a thin margin. The flu season alone can create serious challenges. Now we must be able to respond to ongoing health care needs and be prepared to handle chemical accidents, truck bombs, planes used as missiles, or outbreaks of anthrax and biological diseases. And we must be able to respond in all parts of the country at all times.

"We have heard from public health experts - like Commissioner Wilhelm -- in Chicago, Illinois and around the country that we are simply not equipped to respond adequately. We have excellent and committed public health and medical personnel who are doing their best to meet expected and unexpected needs. But we are dangerously unprepared to meet the potential challenges ahead.

"Some of those challenges will be in the form of disasters like the World Trade Center or Pentagon, where the damage is immediate and overwhelming. Others will come in the form of biological terrorism, where damage is ongoing and exposure and infections occur over the course of days and weeks. This means that we need to have a multifaceted public health system, including surge capacity, improved communication links and the ability to detect, investigate and respond to outbreaks of biological

diseases.

"Unfortunately, many of the critical elements needed are not in place.□□

"We face critical shortages of nurses and other medical professionals, and many are not adequately trained in detection and response.□

"Many local health departments and community health providers do not have internet capacity or even fax machines, meaning that they cannot be informed of potential emergencies or given response instructions on a timely basis.

"Our laboratories are overstretched and we do not have the number of trained epidemiologists we need.

"Many local health systems do not have the hospital beds, medical staff or facilities necessary to deal with events like the World Trade Center or possible chemical attacks. Neither are many medical professionals trained to detect biological illnesses or respond to reports of anthrax exposure.

"As a member of the Emergency Preparedness and Response Working Group of the Democratic Homeland Security Task Force, I have been working with my colleagues to change course on public health.

"Last month, as part of the \$40 billion emergency supplemental funding bill, we provided \$2.5 billion to the Public Health and Social Services Emergency Fund at the Department of Health and Human Services and to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.□ Over a third of that amount is for the National Pharmaceutical Stockpile to treat anthrax and other infections and the purchase of smallpox vaccines.□□ There is over a \$1 billion to upgrade CDC facilities and capacities, including \$865 million to expand state and local capacities.□ In addition, we provided \$140 billion to reimburse organizations that have already experienced attacks and \$135 billion to help hospitals prepare to deal with bioterrorist events.□□

"This emergency supplemental funding is different from the separate public health/bioterrorism legislation passed by the House and Senate in December.□ The House bill spelled out specifically how it wanted to spend \$1 billion public health funds to improve state and local preparedness planning. The House bill included \$50 million to help Chicago and other large cities develop Metropolitan Medical Response Systems and over \$250 million to expand local and state laboratory capacity and training for health departments.□ Other specifically authorized programs include initiatives to improve communications among the CDC, local health departments and frontline providers; to train epidemic disaster response teams and to provide rapid toxic screening.□ The House bill also included funding to help hospitals deal with public health threats, but it also provided funding to community health centers, clinics, school-based health facilities since they are likely to get the first warnings of any problems.□

"It is unclear which of those specific initiatives will be funded under the emergency supplemental bill, since most of the decisions will be left to Secretary Thompson. He has indicated that he will turn funding over to the states and let them decide based on "guidance" that he will issue over the next few weeks."

"We need to make sure that critical state and local initiatives are funded and funded adequately. The funding already funded must be used effectively. And, we must recognize that the \$865 million already provided for state and local public health initiatives is just a start. We will need to do more to make sure that every community is adequately protected. We must not let local public health efforts get short-changed or to let any one argue that the emergency supplemental bill has solved our public health needs. And we must make sure that the needed resources get to those who we really on for preparation, early alerts, and response.

"We all know that an effective public health system rests on the foundation of local health departments and local providers. They must get funding they need to meet anticipated and ongoing public health needs as well as unanticipated public health threats.

"We must act now to revitalize our public health system. We cannot guarantee public health and safety with half-way measures and we cannot do it on the cheap. I will do everything possible to make sure that, when Congress reconvenes this week, we act to make sure that local and state public health officials have all the resources that they need to protect us."