

Advancing innovation to save lives

Friday, March 11, 2016

Dear Members of Congress,

For the second time in three years, the world is facing a global health emergency. Not long after the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) epidemic was slowed, another virus, Zika Virus (ZIKV), is sweeping through the Americas. Echoing the experience with Ebola, the world once again has no approved vaccines, diagnostics, or therapeutics to respond to an outbreak. Worse, this time scientists know far less about the virus or the disease.

As members of the Global Health Technologies Coalition (GHTC)—a group of more than 25 nonprofit organizations working to save and improve lives by encouraging research and development (R&D) for essential health technologies—we urge Congress to champion policy that supports sustainable global health R&D for urgently needed tools and technologies to diagnose, treat, and prevent all neglected infectious diseases, including Zika. This includes fully funding the White House request for \$1.9 billion in new appropriations to enhance the United States' ability to respond to the Zika outbreak. The plan includes strong support for R&D into new diagnostics, treatments, and therapeutics for Zika, and is critical to mounting an effective response.

The United States is a global leader in biomedical research, incubating innovation and approving novel health products and technologies, but in recent years funding for global health R&D has steadily declined. Excluding emergency Ebola appropriations, US investment in research on neglected diseases was lower in 2014 than in any year since tracking started in 2007. This is especially risky in an era of globalization, where diseases know no borders and pandemic infectious diseases are an ever-present health and security threat.

The repercussions of the United States' declining investment are evident. Due to sequester-era spending cuts in 2012, development of a promising Ebola vaccine—one that had been fast tracked for US Food and Drug Administration (US FDA) approval—was permanently stalled. As a result, we had no tools in hand to treat or prevent Ebola during the 2014 outbreak. Zika presents another example: Because we lack a sustainable plan for investing in global health R&D, Zika is a virus and associated disease we know little about and for which we have limited diagnostics, vaccines, or treatments.

A strong US response to the Zika outbreak is critical, not because emergency funding is a sustainable solution to stem the increasing epidemic in Latin America, but because it's the only option left to mitigate the crisis and keep Americans safe. The scale of the outbreak is staggering—spanning 26 countries in the Western Hemisphere—and the human cost is even higher. Zika infection has been linked to microcephaly, adverse pregnancy outcomes in infected pregnant women, and *Guillain-Barre* syndrome—a form of temporary paralysis. While these associations with Zika transmission have not yet been proven causative, Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, testified before Congress that the linkages are quite strong. International experts agree, and the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the cluster of microcephaly cases and other neurological disorders reported in Brazil, following a similar cluster in French Polynesia in 2014, constitutes a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC).

In championing R&D to address the Zika outbreak—and the next infectious disease epidemic—it is critical that we do not divert funds dedicated to the US Ebola response, which are just beginning to show promise in developing new vaccines and diagnostics, advancing therapeutics, and building more resilient health systems in affected countries. R&D is inherently a long process: it takes on average 12 to 15 years to develop a vaccine approved for widespread use, from first proof of concept to first licensure. This timeline is far longer when you include initial discovery research to understand new pathogens or diseases. For this reason, sustained funding for R&D, with a long-term focus, is vitally important for developing effective drugs, diagnostics, vaccines, and other technologies for infectious diseases. Reallocating funding before we have fully developed an Ebola vaccine, finalized an effective treatment, and finished the job, is shortsighted, dangerous, and prone to leave the United States unprepared for another Ebola outbreak despite tremendous investment.

Sustained, predictable funding for R&D into endemic and emerging neglected infectious diseases is key to staying ahead of future outbreaks and having tools ready to address threats like Ebola and Zika. It is also vital to addressing the ongoing burdens of endemic diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. We urge Congress to commit to a long-term vision for financing global health research that ensures we have the tools necessary to treat both endemic and emerging diseases. Global health is American health, and sustained commitment to global health R&D is critical to keeping Americans safe, saving lives around the world, and promoting global health security.

Please do not hesitate to contact Erin Will Morton, Coalition Director, at ewmorton@ghtcoalition.org or (202) 540-4379, if you have questions or need any additional information.

Sincerely,



Aeras



American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene



Drugs for Neglected Diseases *initiative*



FHI 360



Global Alliance to Prevent Prematurity and Stillbirth
an initiative of Seattle Children's



Global Health Council



International AIDS Vaccine Initiative



Infectious Diseases Society of America



International Vaccine Institute



Medicines for Malaria Venture



PATH



Population Council



TB Alliance



UPMC Center for Health Security