

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN GORDON H. SMITH

U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging
“Preparing for Pandemic Flu”
May 25, 2006

Good morning, and thank you all for coming.

We have learned a great deal in the last several years about emergency planning and response. The tragedies of September 11 and hurricanes Katrina and Rita showed us all just how vulnerable we can be to both man-made and natural disasters.

Applying the lessons we learn from the past, we move forward with preparing to address the potential threats of tomorrow. While much may still be unknown about what those threats might be, more and more indicators suggest that we may soon face a pandemic outbreak of a new influenza virus.

One does not have to look back far in history to see how devastating a severe pandemic flu outbreak can be to society. The 1918 Spanish flu killed an estimated two percent of the world’s population—mainly the young and healthy. The milder Hong Kong flu outbreak in 1968 killed 34,000 in the U.S. alone and caused between \$71 and \$166 billion in economic loss.

We have been fortunate not to experience a catastrophic flu outbreak for many decades. But the emergence of the highly aggressive avian flu virus in the late 1990s has generated a sense of urgency among the world’s public health officials. Just this week, a case of human-to-human transmission of the avian flu virus was reported in Indonesia. Reports such as these suggest that the next severe influenza outbreak is looming on the horizon.

In response to this threat, the United States has undertaken a significant effort to prepare for the next pandemic. Just recently, the Homeland Security Council released a lengthy pandemic influenza implementation plan. This report provides broad directives for all sectors of society to follow in order to effectively prepare for the next flu outbreak.

I commend the efforts of the Administration to put forth a comprehensive framework for pandemic flu preparedness, but it is clear we still have much to do. Biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies continue to search for a safe and effective pandemic flu vaccine. Hospitals and other medical facilities are developing plans to ensure they have the necessary supplies and staff to handle a significant influx of patients.

As we move forward with this important work, it is essential that we keep the special needs of older Americans in mind. They may be more vulnerable to an infection due to pre-existing health conditions or weakened immune systems. The more outreach

we can do to the elderly in our communities before an outbreak occurs, the better protected they will be.

I hope we can use today's hearing to delve more deeply into what needs to be accomplished to safeguard all Americans from the harms of a pandemic, but especially those most vulnerable, such as the elderly, the disabled, the chronically ill and children.

I am pleased Secretary Leavitt can be with us and I look forward to his testimony. The witnesses we have assembled represent many of the key parties that will be involved in the initial response to a flu pandemic. If we have learned anything from the past, it is that all levels of the public and private sectors must coordinate their efforts to successfully respond to an emergency.

While much is still unknown about the nature of the next influenza outbreak, we must press forward with implementing a comprehensive response effort. If the virus that sparks the next pandemic resembles the avian flu strain, estimates have shown that the loss of life could be as severe as the 1918 Spanish flu.

As Benjamin Franklin once said, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." We may not be able to prevent the next pandemic outbreak from occurring, but we can lessen its impact on society if we prepare sufficiently. I am confident that we are headed in the right direction with our response plans; we simply need to be mindful of the needs of all citizens—young and old, healthy and ill—as we move forward.

In light of today's discussion of pandemic flu preparedness, I am please to join my colleague Senator Bayh in filing the All-Hazards Public Health Emergency and Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Act. This important legislation will help state and local communities better respond to the unique public health threats they might face and creates new tools to encourage much needed public health workforce development.

I hope the Response Act will help guide Congress' discussion of how future public health planning and response efforts can better safeguard the health and well-being of our citizens.

With that, I'll turn to my colleague Senator Kohl for his opening remarks.