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Statement of Rep. Jason Chaffetz
Ranking Republican Member
Subcommittee on the Federal Workforce, Postal, and
the District of Columbia

*“Protecting the Protectors:
An Assessment of Front-line Federal Workers in Response to the Swine Flu (H1N1)
Outbreak”*

May 13, 2009

Thank you, Chairman Lynch, for holding this important hearing on “Protecting the Protectors: An Assessment of Front-line Federal Workers in Response to the Swine Flu (H1N1) Outbreak” I also want to thank the witnesses for taking time out of their busy schedules to testify before the Subcommittee.

As federal workers across all sectors have been involved in the response to the current pandemic, it is crucial that the proper protocols are in place to protect these workers. The health of Americans depends on a healthy federal workforce. I hope our witnesses can give us insight into the current response to the H1N1 epidemic and help us assess where we have succeeded and where we have failed.

As a result of threats from SARS and Avian influenza, former President George W. Bush issued the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza on November 1, 2005. The Strategy guides the nation’s readiness and response to flu pandemics, and has given direction to the federal, state and local governments on how to respond in the wake of the current H1N1 flu outbreak. A key part of the Strategy, “sustaining infrastructure and mitigating impact to the economy and the functioning of society,” is exactly what we are here to talk about today.

Although a pandemic cannot damage physical infrastructure like roads and powerlines the way other catastrophic events might, it can cripple an organization through impact on the organization's human resources, and prevent it from completing its essential functions. When that organization is the federal government, the consequences can be dire. Planning for the protection of federal workers from illness, and also for continuity of operations should a large enough number of employees get sick, is essential. A strong federal response to a pandemic is key to mitigating the severity of the illness and loss of life, and for easing the potentially devastating effects that an outbreak of pandemic flu can have on our nation's economy.

Personnel policies must reflect the twofold goal of keeping our federal workers healthy and therein ensuring continuity of operations. Providing protective gear, updating telework and other social distancing policies, and implementing health information technology are valuable parts of a pandemic flu strategy. These tools allow federal agencies to continue their important roles in responding to an emergency.

Recently, it was brought to my attention that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) while issuing written guidance to protect its employees, is not in fact executing this guidance on the front lines. Managers, I am told are *prohibiting* Customs and Border Protection officers from wearing protective masks. Since our borders provide an opportunity to slow the spread of H1N1, we must ensure the health of our first line of defense -- Border Patrol agents, Transportation Safety Administration officers, and other law enforcement and health care professionals. Disturbed by this contradictory message from DHS, I, along with 19 of my colleagues, sent a letter to Secretary Janet Napolitano demanding immediate revocation of the prohibition on masks.

It is a delicate balance that we must strike between protecting our front line employees and not causing mass public fear and alarm. I hope our witnesses can provide some answers as we look at the effect this epidemic is having on our federal workforce.