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U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20515

Statement for the Record for Chairman Bennie G. Thompson
Chairman, Committee on Homeland Security

Hearing entitled "*Protecting the Protectors: An Assessment of the Front-line Federal Workers in Response to the H1N1 Outbreak*"

Before the

Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on Federal Workforce, Postal Service and the District of Columbia

May 14, 2009

First, I want to thank Chairman Lynch for permitting me to submit a statement for the record for today's hearing entitled, "Protecting the Protectors: An Assessment of the Front-line Federal Workers in Response to the H1N1 Outbreak."

To date, the Federal government's efforts in confronting the H1N1 virus are commendable. However, I believe we can all agree that the best way to ensure an optimal response to an emergency situation is to provide preparation, training, and clear, concise guidance.

The Federal response to the H1N1 outbreak has varied based on the level of preparation by individual agencies. Where there were plans and procedures in place, response efforts have been excellent. Where plans and procedures were absent, response efforts have not been well-coordinated.

As Chairman of the Committee on Homeland Security, I am closely following the response efforts by the Department of Homeland Security.

The Department of Homeland Security includes nearly 40,000 Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) employees who process well over 1 million border crossings a day; over 40,000 Transportation Security Administration (TSA) employees who are in contact with over 2 million passengers a day; and about 17,000 Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) employees who interact with thousands of persons each day. These frontline Federal workers have yet to receive clear and consistent guidance on measures they can take to reduce or eliminate the possibility of exposure to this virus.

The Nation's frontline employees deserve clear guidance on the steps they can take to protect themselves and others. Clear communication on the use of protective personal equipment can assist in these efforts and should be provided.

Complicating the effort to provide guidance is the fact that the previous Administration failed to complete its pandemic planning. Therefore, directives regarding protective measures, including the use of masks were not issued. This left the Department of Homeland Security, as well as others in the Federal government, in the unfortunate position of having to immediately develop and issue guidance. Although limited guidance was issued, unfortunately, it was implemented unevenly. This lack of clarity may have contributed to the uncertainty experienced by many in the Federal workforce and the general public.

Unfortunately, this situation was foreseeable. In January 2009, the Committee on Homeland Security released a report entitled, *Getting Beyond Getting Ready for Pandemic Influenza*. The report identified a number of weaknesses left behind by the previous Administration including:

- Scant evidence of pandemic influenza planning for the Federal Departments and agencies; and
- A lack of guidance on the use of non-pharmaceutical interventions (including the use of masks).

Mr. Chairman, I believe that this Nation and this new Administration must take advantage of this opportunity to identify lessons learned, complete plans, and to issue guidance – so that we are better prepared for more severe influenza outbreaks and pandemics, should they occur.

I thank you for your leadership on this issue and look forward to working with you in assuring that our Federal workforce and the Nation are ready and equipped to face this outbreak and any future outbreaks.