

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 27, 2016

The Honorable John F. Kerry
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
320 21st Street NW
Washington, DC 20451

The Honorable Sylvia Matthews Burwell
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20201

The Honorable Jeh Johnson
Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
3801 Nebraska Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20016

Dear Secretaries Kerry, Burwell, and Johnson:

As leaders of the departments jointly responsible for protecting Americans from potential public health threats, I write to urge a coordinated and comprehensive federal response to the Zika virus.

The Zika virus, which can be carried by mosquitos endemic to regions of the United States, represents a major risk to the health of pregnant women and their unborn children. As you know, nearly 4,000 cases of microcephaly and birth deformities in infants in Brazil are being linked to an outbreak of the Zika virus, and the virus's rapid spread to twenty-one countries throughout the Americas is very concerning. In recent days, the virus has been discovered in Americans who have traveled to countries where Zika has been found, and the World Health Organization has said it is likely to spread to nearly every nation in the Western Hemisphere

Although those infected with the virus are not at deadly risk to their own health, the potential risk to pregnant women and unborn children, as well as the suspected link between Zika virus and Guillain-Barre syndrome, are all reasons to vigorously pursue a better understanding of how this virus is spreading in affected countries and the steps the U.S. must take to ensure Americans are protected.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has an important role to play through its Global Disease Detection Program to track and analyze the Zika virus, a capability which can and should be augmented by State Department reporting from our embassy personnel in affected countries. Given the large number of Americans expected to travel there for the 2016 Olympic Games, it is encouraging that the CDC is

working with health officials in Brazil, which has been hardest hit by the Zika virus, to better understand the potential health impacts of the virus and the most effective means of preventing its spread.

Research exploring the potential links between Zika virus, microcephaly and Guillain-Barre syndrome is also critical, as are efforts to discover a vaccine and to intercept the spread of mosquitos carrying the virus. I encourage the federal government to do all it can to support strategies to mitigate the spread of Zika, as well as to disseminate new findings and information to the American public.

Within our own borders, U.S. Customs and Border Protection should enhance monitoring at ports of entry for mosquito infestations in cargo and for individuals demonstrating symptoms of the virus. The Department of Health and Human Services should also work with state and local public health officials and frontline health care providers to ensure they have the most current information about the virus, how to test for it, and how it could impact at-risk groups.

In 2014 and 2015, American public health and military personnel performed heroically in West Africa to help stop the spread of the Ebola virus, and while the Zika virus does not yet require the same scale of resources, I encourage your agencies to coordinate efforts to address this challenge with the same urgency.

As a member of the Senate Committee on Appropriations, I also request that your agencies swiftly detail any additional resources or authorities that may be needed to protect our nation from the Zika virus.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator