

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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**DEMOCRATIC LEADERS PRESS ADMINISTRATION ON AVIAN FLU
PREPARATIONS**

Washington, DC – Today, a group of Democratic Senators joined together to urge the Bush administration to lay out its plans to prepare Americans for a potential Avian flu pandemic. In a letter to Secretary Michael Leavitt, the Senators called on the administration to provide crucial information to the Congress and the American people about their plans to prepare and protect Americans from this potentially catastrophic illness.

A text of the letter is below:

October 7, 2005

The Honorable Michael O. Leavitt
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Leavitt:

We are writing regarding the federal government's preparedness to deal with the threat of an avian influenza pandemic. Although all experts agree that our level of preparedness here at home is critical to limiting the human and economic costs of an avian flu pandemic, we are deeply concerned that the federal government is ill-prepared to respond to this looming crisis. We need to hear from you how this troubling situation developed and what you believe can be done to address it.

As you know, it will take several months to produce and distribute a vaccine once we have identified a strain of influenza with pandemic potential. In the meantime, public health experts agree that antiviral medications will be a crucial stopgap defense against a pandemic. These medications could greatly help to reduce illness and death and to contain an emerging pandemic prior to the development of an effective vaccine.

The World Health Organization has recommended that countries stockpile enough antivirals to treat at least 25 percent of their populations. The Infectious Disease Society of America has recommended that the U.S. stockpile enough antivirals to treat up to 50 percent of the population. While other nations have ordered enough antiviral medication to treat between twenty and forty percent of their populations, the federal government has only ordered enough to

treat less than two percent of Americans. On September 29, 2005, the Senate unanimously approved a \$3.9 billion amendment to the Department of Defense Appropriations bill that would provide more than \$3 billion to purchase enough anti-viral medication to protect at least 50 percent of the U.S. population.

Unfortunately, resources alone do not guarantee that we will be able to secure in a timely manner enough antivirals to protect a large portion of Americans. Currently, experts believe that the antiviral oseltamivir (known as Tamiflu), is the best treatment option for individuals infected with the current avian influenza strain (H5N1). According to Hoffman – La Roche, the only pharmaceutical company licensed to produce Tamiflu, their manufacturing process for Tamiflu takes eight to twelve months and they lack a surge capacity to meet large scale demand upon the outbreak of a pandemic. Moreover, because the United States is behind other nations that have already placed orders with Roche, it would take until the end of 2007 to deliver enough Tamiflu to the Strategic National Stockpile for just 25 percent of our population. Obviously, protecting at least 50 percent of the American public as called for by all 100 U.S. Senators will take even longer.

In light of this deeply troubling state of affairs, we believe it is critical that you undertake the following steps:

- 1) explain why our preparations are behind those of other nations;
- 2) explain your plan to provide sufficient protection for the American people;
- 3) provide us with your assessment of whether your administration possesses the legal authorities required to address this critical issue; and
- 4) if a determination is made that the Administration lacks the requisite authorities, that you immediately consult with congressional leaders on legislation that would address this problem.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Senator Harry Reid
Senator Dick Durbin
Senator Evan Bayh
Senator Tom Harkin
Senator Ted Kennedy
Senator Barack Obama

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