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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510–6250

September 15, 2014

Thomas Frieden, MD, MPH
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30329

Dear Director Frieden,

More than 4,400 people in West Africa, along with four Americans, have contracted the Ebola virus and nearly 2,300 have died since March 2014, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). This outbreak of Ebola is the largest and most devastating Ebola outbreak in history. Left untreated, researchers have estimated the virus could spread to hundreds of thousands more individuals. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have demonstrated the important role the U.S. can play in providing humanitarian assistance and technical expertise in an effort to limit the spread of the outbreak. However, I am concerned that a lack of coordination and communication between the CDC and other agencies that are tasked to carry out the programmatic functions of the CDC may contribute to improper preparedness and surveillance of the U.S. homeland.

Section 361 of the Public Health Service Act authorizes the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services to take measures to prevent the entry and spread of communicable diseases from foreign countries into the U.S. Federal regulations (42 CFR 70, 71) designate the CDC as the appropriate agency to carry out these functions, including the monitoring of persons arriving at U.S. ports of entry. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) serves as the agency "on the ground" charged with the direct control and protection of all points of entry to the U.S.

The WHO has also recommended that countries with an international transportation hub, including those currently "unaffected" with the virus, should establish a process to manage travelers who have unexplained fever and are traveling from an Ebola-infected region. Based on reports from officials at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), I understand that currently the CBP is under direction to only use "passive screening" for Ebola at U.S. points of entry. Based on the WHO's recommendations and the large number of international entry points into the U.S., I am concerned that the CDC is not providing appropriate and timely guidance to the CBP as it monitors the U.S. points of entry.

The exponential increase in Ebola infections and deaths further accelerates the necessity to ensure every U.S. point of entry is closely monitored and controlled. In order to verify that the proper security measures are in place, I respectfully request you provide us with the following information:

1. What communication has CDC provided to CBP in direct response to the escalation of Ebola?

2. What surveillance measures has CDC recommended CBP implement at each U.S. port of entry?

3. What is the threshold for CDC to require CBP to transition from "passive" surveillance to "active" surveillance screening?

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We would appreciate your response as soon as possible. Should you have any questions regarding this letter, please contact Sarah Johnson of my staff at (202)-224-3353.

Sincerely,

Rob Portman
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on the Efficiency and Effectiveness
Of Federal Programs and the Federal Workforce