



Physicians Caring for Texans

May 13, 2016

The Honorable Lloyd Doggett
2307 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Doggett:

On behalf of the more than 49,000 physician and medical student members of the Texas Medical Association — and our millions of patients — I am writing to urge you, members of both chambers of Congress, and the Obama administration to find common ground immediately to help us combat the Zika virus.

As a survivor of West Nile virus meningitis and encephalitis, I know quite personally the horrors of these mosquito-borne, tropical infections. The people of Texas look to us, their physicians and their leaders, to help keep them safe and healthy.

So far, Texas has 33 confirmed cases of Zika virus disease. All of those cases were connected to people who traveled to Zika-infected regions outside the country; none were contracted from mosquitoes in Texas. But mosquito season is here. Texas is home to 85 different species of mosquito, including the *Aedes aegypti*, the primary carrier of the Zika virus.

It is only a matter of time before one of those mosquitoes bites an infected traveler and then passes the disease on to another Texan. Local and state public health officers in Texas are working hard to prepare for that day, but we need help. We have the experience and expertise necessary, but our public health infrastructure is not up to a task of this magnitude.

Like many other states, Texas is now dealing with a significant reduction in Public Health Emergency Preparedness funds. Unfortunately for Texas, this amounts to almost a \$4 million cut for 2016-17. This represents a nearly 10-percent drop in Ebola funding allocated to Texas for infectious diseases preparedness, a much larger cut than most other states have experienced. Texas costs related to Ebola were higher than most. Despite this, Texas is finding ways to keep local health departments whole so they can continue their current response and prevention activities. But they need additional funding immediately, not this fall.

Our unique geography, population, and size put Texans at a greater risk of Zika infection than most of the rest of the country. We are studying this virus carefully and gaining a greater understanding of its potential for harming Texans, especially our most vulnerable, and even the Texas economy. We know that we cannot spray our way out of Zika. We know that when mosquitoes begin spreading the disease here:

- We will need timely laboratory testing, surveillance, and follow-up of those who may be infected, especially pregnant women and those who believe they may be pregnant. This will be a burden to private physicians who stand on the front lines of health care.
- The need for federal, state and local public health officials to enhance efforts to identify and coordinate information regarding individuals who test positive for Zika virus will dramatically increase in the event of local transmission.
- We will need a comprehensive communication program to reach and educate the public and the health care community.
- Most importantly, the best evidence currently available about Zika tells us we will need coordinated federal, state, and local preparedness.

Here in Texas, we've been hit by Ebola, by West Nile virus, by the H1N1 virus, and by more natural disasters than any other state. We need a united, coordinated response to Zika, not partisan politics. We need action from you, your colleagues in the House and Senate, and the Obama Administration to free up this desperately needed funding.

We already have waited too long. We need that action now. Several months from now will be too late.

Sincerely,



Don R. Read, MD

President

Texas Medical Association

Cc: The Honorable Sylvia Burwell, Secretary, U.S. Health and Human Services
Department
Tom Frieden, MD, Director, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
John Hellerstedt, MD, Executive Commissioner, Texas Department of State Health
Services