

DELAURO AND LARSON SEEK ANSWERS, ACTION ON FLU VACCINE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: October 22, 2004

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WASHINGTON, D.C.- U.S. Reps. Rosa DeLauro and John B. Larson today sent a letter to the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Tommy Thompson, seeking answers as to when and how the federal government planned to secure adequate doses of flu vaccine for Americans, as well as how health crises such as this will be avoided in the future.

The text of the letter is below:
October 21, 2004

The Honorable Tommy G. Thompson
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20501

Dear Secretary Thompson:

We are writing today because of our great concern over the recent news that the U.S. supply of flu vaccine has been cut in half when British regulators shut down shipments from Chiron Corporation. As you know, about 36,000 Americans die from flu-related complications each year and more than 200,000 Americans are hospitalized. The U.S. has been left with 54 million doses instead of the anticipated 100 million doses and we have been contacted by a number of our constituents concerned that they or their loved ones will not be able to get their flu shot. Several of our elderly constituents have told us about waiting in line for hours for flu shots that they never get. We, too, are concerned about what policies have been implemented to address this and hope you can help clarify them. Therefore, we have a number of questions about how this problem will be remedied and avoided in years to come.

On Wednesday, October 13, President Bush declared that, "We're working with Canada to - hopefully they'll produce a - help us realize the vaccine necessary to make sure our citizens have got flu vaccinations during this upcoming flu season." We were heartened by what we consider a policy reversal, since during the course of his Administration, President Bush has repeatedly stated that imported Canadian drugs are not safe for American consumers. However, the next day you were quoted as saying that obtaining the vaccine from two companies that sell vaccines in Canada and other nations was "doubtful." We are hopeful that you can clarify the Administration's position with regards to obtaining pharmaceuticals from Canada. Additionally, what are the specific reasons that these doses of the vaccine would not be made available to Americans?

On October 8, President Bush also said, "Government-sponsored health care would lead to rationing. It would ruin the quality of health care in America." However, on October 13, the President offered his solution to the flu vaccine shortage urging rationing by saying, "My call to our fellow Americans is if you're healthy, if you're younger, don't get a flu shot this year. Help us prioritize those who need to get the flu shot, the elderly and the young. The CDC, responsible for health in the United States, is setting those priorities and is allocating the flu vaccine accordingly." Therefore, we would like to know what specific plans the Department of Health and Human Services, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are doing to address the flu vaccine shortage for this coming flu season, other than rationing the system by urging citizens to not get a flu shot.

We would also like to address future flu seasons. We have been contacted by Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal about the process for procuring the flu vaccine. Due to his concern over the current flu vaccine shortage and past shortages, Attorney General Blumenthal is urging Congress to consider enacting a program of federal purchases of adequate vaccine quantities to assure adequate availability of the vaccine at affordable prices. Would the Administration be open to Attorney General Blumenthal's suggestion? If not, what plans does the Administration have to address the procurement of the flu vaccine in the future?

Thank you in advance for addressing these extremely important health issues. We look forward to working with you and our colleagues in Congress to address this problem.

Sincerely,

JOHN B. LARSON
Member of Congress

ROSA L. DELAURO
Member of Congress
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