

# **Durbin urges President Obama to take Robust & aggressive actions to address spread of the Zika Virus**

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**In letter to President Obama, Senate Democrats call for a coordinated interagency response and investments in research and response programs to prevent, detect and control outbreak of infectious diseases**

**WASHINGTON, D.C.** – After visiting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia earlier this week, U.S. Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) today joined the full Senate Democratic Caucus in sending a letter to President Obama urging a coordinated interagency response plan to address the spread of the Zika virus both at

home and abroad. In Atlanta, Durbin met with CDC Director Dr. Thomas Frieden and discussed the recent rise in cases related to the Zika virus, which has spread across Brazil and twenty-two other countries in Central and South America. The CDC has so far confirmed more than thirty traveler-related cases in the United States, including three in Illinois.

The letter sent today by Senate Democrats calls for the President to take a number of new actions, including taking the Zika virus into consideration as the Administration coordinates and allocates resources in the Consolidated Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2016 and moves forward with the Fiscal Year 2017 budget request. Additionally, the letter urges President Obama to:

Develop a coordinated interagency response plan to address the Zika virus both at home and abroad;

Direct USAID and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to identify key gaps in the international and country-level response in order to best inform our response plan and disseminate, where appropriate, at border crossings and airports;

Ensure that federal agencies work with state and local partners to develop a cohesive national strategy for the monitoring, identification, and reporting of domestic Zika infections;

Direct HHS and the Department of Homeland Security to develop educational materials to inform travelers regarding the risk of Zika virus exposure;

Ramp up research efforts, including at the National Institutes of Health, to better understand the link between the Zika virus, microcephaly, Guillain-Barré Syndrome, and other public health impacts and accelerate rapid diagnostic and vaccine development; and

Encourage federal agencies to coordinate, collaborate, or share information with their international counterparts.

The Zika Virus is transmitted by the *Aedes aegypti* species of mosquitoes, which are also found in the United States. For most, the symptoms of Zika are mild, but when pregnant women become infected, the effects can be devastating. Zika has been linked to microcephaly in developing fetuses, which can lead to below-average head size, developmental difficulties, and brain damage.

The full text of the letter is available below.

*Dear President Obama:*

*The ongoing outbreak of the Zika virus requires an urgent and aggressive response from the United States. We are writing to urge you to develop a coordinated interagency response plan to address the spread of the Zika virus both at home and abroad, and*

protect pregnant women and children. We also recognize that much is still unknown about the Zika virus, and therefore urge you to consider the potential impact the Zika virus will have on the funding needs of the Emerging Pandemic Threats (EPT) Program at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Division of Vector-Borne Diseases at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Research Services Mosquito and Fly Research Unit, and other key programs in Fiscal Year (FY)17. We believe that a well-coordinated interagency response plan, coupled with strong investments in our research and response programs, is critical to addressing the Zika virus.

The Zika virus is transmitted via bites from the same kind of mosquitoes that carry dengue fever, chikungunya, and yellow fever. For most, the symptoms of Zika are mild, but when pregnant women become infected, there is early evidence its effects can be devastating. Zika has been linked to microcephaly in developing fetuses, which can lead to below-average head size, developmental difficulties, and brain damage. Scientists are also evaluating a possible link between the Zika virus and Guillain-Barré Syndrome, a rare condition that can cause muscle weakness and paralysis. These potential impacts have spurred the World Health Organization to declare the rise in Zika-linked birth defects and neurological conditions a Public Health Emergency of International Concern.

In the Americas, it is anticipated that the outbreak could infect up to 4 million people. Because Zika is carried by low-moisture dwelling mosquitos, local transmission is predicted to spread to all countries and territories where the *Aedes aegypti* is found, including the United States. There is a critical and urgent need for a robust and coordinated response at all levels of government, and it is necessary to enhance efforts to control outbreaks, counter the spread of the disease, and ultimately reduce the potential for outbreaks in the United States.

Investing in the effort to combat the Zika virus abroad is one of the most important things we can do to prevent widespread transmission of the virus at home. The USAID's EPT Program helps developing countries prevent, detect, and control the outbreak of infectious diseases. The program has been able to successfully use the technical expertise of the CDC in African, Asian, and Latin American countries to combat infectious diseases like Zika. CDC's National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases (NCEZID) further works to protect against the spread of diseases like the Zika virus both at home and abroad, while USDA's Agricultural Research Services Mosquito and Fly Research Unit also plays a critical role in developing better means of mosquito detection, monitoring, and control.

We urge you to take the Zika virus into consideration as you coordinate and allocate resources in the Consolidated Appropriations Act for FY16 and move forward with your

*upcoming FY17 budget request or subsequent amendments.*

*At this time, it is also critically important that we take additional steps to respond to the ongoing outbreak and work to prevent additional cases of Zika from occurring in the United States. To meet this challenge we urge you to:*

*Develop a coordinated interagency response plan to address the Zika virus both at home and abroad;*

*Direct USAID and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to identify key gaps in the international and country-level response in order to best inform our response plan and disseminate, where appropriate, at border crossings and airports;*

*Ensure that federal agencies work with state and local partners to develop a cohesive national strategy for the monitoring, identification, and reporting of domestic Zika infections;*

*Direct HHS and the Department of Homeland Security to develop educational materials to inform travelers regarding the risk of Zika virus exposure;*

*Ramp up research efforts, including at the National Institutes of Health, to better understand the link between the Zika virus, microcephaly, Guillain-Barré Syndrome, and other public health impacts and accelerate rapid diagnostic and vaccine development; and*

*Encourage federal agencies to coordinate, collaborate, or share information with their international counterparts.*

*By taking action now, we can make significant progress toward mitigating the impact of the Zika virus abroad and reduce the potential for Zika virus outbreaks in the United States. Thank you for your consideration of this request.*