

Zika Update



Health Policy Briefing

August 15, 2016

The number of locally transmitted Zika cases in Florida continues to increase and is now estimated at 22, while the number of communities with residents who have contracted the virus is also growing quickly. Last week also saw the first death related to the Zika virus in Texas. An infant born with microcephaly whose mother had traveled to Latin America while pregnant died shortly after birth. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Sylvia Mathews Burwell responded to criticisms from the Texas GOP delegation that the Administration is not distributing the money currently available to fight Zika. She **explained** that of the \$589 million repurposed from other programs, HHS had the authority to spend \$374 million within the U.S. Of that domestic topline, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) received \$222 million, \$143 million of which has been obligated toward anti-Zika efforts as of August 8. Her letter also details the amount of money the administration has spent or plans to spend on Zika response in Texas. Later in the week, HHS announced that the Administration would reprogram \$34 million within the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and \$47 million for the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA) to address the virus and avoid a funding lapse for the agencies' work on a vaccine. The shift in funding for BARDA will come from other HHS agencies, including the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Secretary Burwell noted that the move would negatively impact other public health priorities, such as addressing mental health issues and reducing opioid abuse and addiction. Meanwhile, the Administration and Congress continue to spar over who is to blame for the lack of a funding bill to combat the virus. Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton joined the fray last week, calling on Congress to return from summer recess immediately to pass the bipartisan bill negotiated in the Senate or to negotiate a new solution. The total number of Zika cases across the United States is now estimated at 8,580 as of last Thursday. This is more than double the number of cases that were present when Congress adjourned four weeks ago.

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DeSalvo Steps Down as HIT Coordinator

Dr. Karen DeSalvo has stepped down from her role as the head of the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC), but will remain at HHS as acting assistant secretary of health, focusing on public health issues. Her deputy at ONC Vindell Washington will replace DeSalvo as the top health information technology official.

DEA Declines to Reclassify Marijuana

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has decided to keep marijuana on its schedule of controlled substances in the most restrictive category. The agency will, however, end its restrictions on the growing of marijuana for research purposes. Effective immediately, researchers will be allowed to apply and register with the DEA as growers in the hopes of discovering marijuana derived drugs that are safe and effective for medical use.

Surgeon General Launches New Pain Management Prescribing Website

Surgeon General Vivek Murthy announced the launch of a new website, TurnTheTideRx.org, last week. The site is intended to raise awareness about pain management and proper prescribing practices. The website includes a feature asking health care professionals to take a pledge to educate themselves on how to treat pain safely and effectively, to screen patients for opioid use disorder, to refer to evidenced based treatments, and to recognize addiction as a chronic illness. As of Sunday, 1734 providers had taken the pledge.

Lawmakers Request Information on LRN Capabilities

Leaders of the House Energy and Commerce Committee have **written** to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) requesting more information on the capabilities of the agency's Laboratory Response Network (LRN). "The key to a successful response to a potential bioterrorism event relies on our ability to rapidly detect and diagnose suspected clinical cases. This task was clearly assigned to the CDC LRN for implementation and preparation of this aspect of the nation's biodefense," the letter states. The committee members ask for more information about how many labs there are in the nation, as well as their readiness to address select agents, toxins, and infectious diseases. The lawmakers request a response to their nine questions by August 25, 2016. The letter was signed by Chairman Fred Upton (R-Mich.), Ranking Member Frank Pallone (D-NJ), Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee Chairman Tim Murphy (R-Pa.) and Subcommittee Ranking Member Diana DeGette (D-Co.).

Study Shows Less ACO Participation in Poorer Communities

New research published in Health Affairs indicates that physician participation in accountable care organizations (ACOs) is lower in places with vulnerable populations than in more affluent communities. Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania found that participation in ACOs varies widely across hospital referral regions, but that physicians practicing in areas where a higher percentage of the population is black, living in poverty, uninsured, disabled, or less educated had significantly lower rates of participation in ACOs than other physicians. The authors suggest that vulnerable populations' lack of access to physicians participating in ACOs could exacerbate existing disparities in health care quality.