

‘Fighting Bioterrorism Together’

**Remarks by the Honorable Tommy G. Thompson
Secretary of Health and Human Services**

**To the U.S. Conference of Mayors
Washington, D.C.
October 24, 2001**

Thank you, Mayor Morial, for those kind words, for your leadership of the mayor’s conference and of your beautiful city of New Orleans. With all of our colleagues here, we share a deep commitment to the well being of America’s cities and a profound dedication to making sure that every American has access to all the opportunities available in this great country.

It’s truly a pleasure for me to be with you today. I’m also happy to see emergency management, police and fire officials here because it gives me an opportunity to honor you and your colleagues from across the country who are serving with such honor and distinction. We thank you.

In the past few weeks, the unity of our country has been something wonderful to behold. America has rallied as seldom before in our history. Much of that is due to the tremendous leadership of President Bush.

I know we all share in his spirit of conviction and intensity of purpose. I’m so very proud to be serving with him during these days.

The terrorists caused us great pain. But they steeled our resolve.

Something President Reagan said years ago has a direct bearing on the work before us as America confronts international terrorism. As he put it, “Above all, we must realize that no arsenal, or no weapon in the arsenals of the world, is so formidable as the will and moral courage of free men and women. It is a weapon our adversaries in today’s world do not have. It is a weapon that we as Americans do have. Let that be understood by those who practice terrorism and prey upon their neighbors.”

That’s just as true as we consider the recent spate of anthrax exposures. We all grieve for the three persons who have died. But we are taking aggressive steps to ensure that our postal system is safe ... that our government can function without a break ... and that America has all the resources necessary to handle anything the terrorists want to throw at us.

Let me also emphasize that I know you are in the front lines. You are the men and women who will be called upon first in the event of any major bioterrorist attack. And there can be no finer example of the kind of response we need than Mayor Anthony Williams and Mayor Rudy Guiliani.

We are working with our partners across all levels of government – from the Federal Bureau of Investigation to the U.S. Postal Service, from local hospitals to county governments – to address these more recent terrorist events.

Soon after the first case of anthrax exposure in Florida, the Department of Health and Human Services, through the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), alerted all public health departments in the country to be on the lookout for anthrax-like symptoms, including those associated with inhalation and cutaneous anthrax.

Throughout the past month, the CDC and local public health departments have been working hard to trace back the source of the anthrax-tainted letters that have been received in our country, including in some of your cities.

They have used the best science to follow the trail of these letters. And they have used the best science to assess the risk of anthrax exposure to employees, both at the workplaces where the letters were received and at the postal facilities through which the letters passed. These efforts were evident in the Florida and New York cases where the letters were identified; those who may have been exposed were tested and treated.

Local law enforcement, the FBI, the CDC and state and local health departments all are working together to find the letters in question, identify exposure areas and get treatment to those at risk.

We have good science, but it is also an evolving science. Remember we have never had cases of anthrax attacks in this manner before. It is a new challenge that we are all facing as a country.

But we need to more. So, as I announced yesterday, the CDC will immediately move in at any and all postal facilities that might have handled a piece of mail once anthrax is determined to be present.

We will make medicine immediately available to those employees who may have been at risk of exposure. We have plenty of antibiotics to treat anthrax, and we will err on the side of caution in making sure people are protected. To that end, I'm asking for the cooperation and partnership of local public health departments in this endeavor.

We are also going to lend the U.S. Postal Service our scientific expertise in developing ways to protect postal workers as they sort and deliver the mail, as well as what technology might help in making mailrooms more safe. We have been assisting our colleagues at the postal service from the onset of these painful events and will continue to make our resources and expertise available to them.

And if we suspect that an anthrax-tainted letter may have passed through a facility, we will go there, test the facility and make the appropriate treatment available to those who may have been exposed. So, we're going to act quickly and, if need be, let the science catch up to our actions.

Never has our nation's public health surveillance been more important. And a vital part of a public health response is the job of communicating. So I will tell you the same thing I have told other key groups – including the nation's governors, the American Medical Association, the American Hospital Association and the National Conference of State Legislators – over the past week:

It is imperative that we are all coordinating our messages with local governments and with the CDC. We've all seen stories during the past month where preliminary tests have turned out one way and secondary tests another. It is important that we get health information to the public quickly and accurately.

I know some critics are charging that our public health system is not prepared to respond to a major bioterrorist attack, and that some state and local labs are feeling overwhelmed right now as they respond to people's natural fears about what might be waiting in their mail. I understand that some of you might be feeling overburdened. And I know that some of you here who work in police, emergency and fire response forces are being overwhelmed with calls from concerned citizens.

But we have responded to each and every threat, and we continue and will continue to do so. You should be proud of how well you have responded to events that two months ago would have been unthinkable.

What we have shown working together since September 11th is that a federal, state and city partnership works. But our work is just beginning. What we have learned since September 11th is where we need to focus our efforts to make sure we are better prepared to respond tomorrow than we are today.

So we in the federal government are working to strengthen our partnership with you. We are continuing our efforts to get those of you at the state and local level the help you need even as we prepare for future events. Let me outline some of the specific steps we are taking.

First, I am announcing today the immediate release of \$3 million through the CDC to supplement public health grants to the affected states and cities (New York, New Jersey, the Washington D.C. area and Florida). The award will accelerate active surveillance, detection and confirmation of anthrax cases. These actions will help improve our public health response capabilities.

In addition, last week, President Bush requested additional funds to strengthen our ability to prevent and respond to a bioterrorism attack. Of the total funds requested, \$300 million is being designated to improve state and local response capacity.

The proposal includes:

- \$50 million to support increased capacity at the nation’s hospitals and other health facilities in the event of any incident that could lead to mass casualties;
- \$50 million to bolster the Metropolitan Medical Response System’s (MMRS) ability to respond to bioterrorism, especially as it affects public health (the MMRS consists of federally supported local preparedness efforts in 122 cities);
- \$40 million to support early detection surveillance to identify possible bioterrorist agents;
- \$15 million to support increased capacity in up to an additional 45 state and local laboratories;
- \$10 million to increase capacity for the CDC and state and local labs to assess exposure to 150 hazardous chemical agents; and
- \$10 million to support other local planning efforts.

The President’s request also provides substantial funding for the CDC's rapid response and advanced technology labs and their epidemiology teams. In addition, I want to fund a graduate of the CDC Epidemiology Intelligence Service for each state health department, as well as 410 new FDA inspectors to help ensure our food is not tainted with biochemical or other agents.

But that is not all. Today, I am negotiating with Bayer Corporation to purchase the antibiotic ciproflaxin – known commonly by its brand name, Cipro – for availability if it is needed for treatment in the event of a bioterrorism event involving large numbers of patients.

The bottom line is that we will save the American taxpayers millions of dollars, to which end I will ask Congress to immediately redirect to state and local preparedness efforts.

We also are accelerating the production of vaccines and antibiotics, and investing in essential programs, in cooperation with local and state agencies, to ensure the speedy and orderly distribution of antibiotics and other supplies in the event of a bioterrorist attack.

The President’s request includes \$643 million to expand the National Pharmaceutical Stockpile (NPS) and \$509 million to speed the purchase of 300 million doses of smallpox vaccine. With these resources, we at HHS will expand our ability to respond to an all-hazards event.

As you may know, there are currently eight “Push Packs” located strategically around the country as part of the NPS. Each one includes 84 separate types of supplies, including antibiotics, needles and I-Vs, a tablet counting machine and oxygen masks. Each Push Pack provides a full course of antibiotics and other medical supplies and is shipped to an area within 12 hours to help state and local response efforts.

In the case of New York City, we were able to deliver a Push Pack within seven hours. And beyond that, we also were able to deliver 50,000 tetanus shots and 10,000 gas masks by 5:00 p.m. that day.

These Push Packs have enough drugs to treat two million persons for inhalation anthrax following exposure. I have directed that the stockpile development should be increased for inhalation anthrax, so that 12 million persons can be treated. The CDC will reach that level of response within the next 12 months.

With the additional resources, we will also add four more Push Packs to the current eight already located across the country, making more emergency supplies available and augmenting our existing supplies of 400 tons by another 200 tons.

I am also working with Senators Frist and Kennedy on legislation that will go ever further. We are working together – across parties and across branches of government – to make sure that all new money is spent in the most effective way.

As I have told many members of Congress and many people across America, there's always some good that comes out of the kind of horrendous event we witness on September 11. One of them is that we now have an opportunity to improve and strengthen the public health system in this country. Our public health system has not had the investment it needs in past years, but we recognize that now and are rebuilding it to be the best it can possibly be.

To achieve that purpose, I am talking about it to the President, to Congress, to the nation's governors and state legislators. And now, I'm here to talk to you about it, and to urge you not to let this opportunity pass us by.

Let me close by quoting one of my great heroes, Winston Churchill. I'm reminded of something he said during the early days of the Second World War: "Victory at all costs, victory in spite of terror, victory however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is no survival."

That's a goal we all share. And it's one I know we will achieve.

Thank you again for your commitment to ensuring the health and safety of your citizens and for asking me to join you today.

God bless you, and God bless America.