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ONE HUNDRED TENTH CONGRESS

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Washington, DC 20515-6115

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February 5, 2007

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The Honorable Michael O. Leavitt
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Mr. Secretary:

The Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations has continued to monitor the tragic effects of Hurricane Katrina on the people and services of the Gulf Region and the efforts made for its recovery. We are especially concerned with the devastation of the region's healthcare delivery system. To better understand this situation, we have held meetings with the Government Accountability Office, as well as your Department, to discuss the Department's role in the reconstruction of the region's health infrastructure (related correspondence attached).

The Subcommittee held a field hearing in New Orleans in January 2006 entitled "Hospital Disaster and Preparedness: Past, Present, and Future," to further expose the myriad issues related to hospital evacuation and healthcare recovery efforts. As part of this review, Members of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations toured several of the destroyed and recovering healthcare facilities, and some have made subsequent visits as well.

This week, a major New Orleans newspaper published an article regarding your most recent proposal to reform the State of Louisiana healthcare system. (See, *Plan to Insure Poor Gets Cool Reception*, New Orleans Times Picayune, February 1, 2007). According to the article, a number of key State and local officials believe your plan is unworkable and will result in less coverage for the uninsured and poor than was provided under the pre-Katrina healthcare delivery model, including the "Charity" public hospital system. While we understand that some believe the pre-Katrina system was not optimal, we are concerned that large populations continue to have their health needs underserved as a result of the storm's destruction of the previous healthcare facilities. In short, spotty or nonexistent coverage of basic healthcare needs cannot be allowed to persist while governments seek the perfect long-term solution.

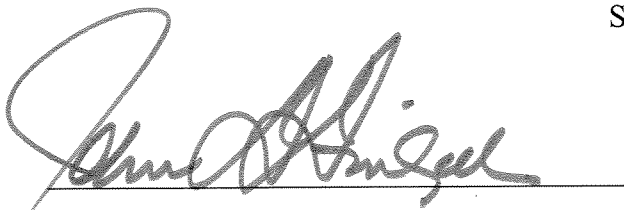
Many believe that the current state of health care in the devastated areas of this region remains critical. For example, just recently, a major "health fair" in New Orleans was held under tents in order to offer basic healthcare services to the poor and uninsured. At least one press account reported that this healthcare fair was overwhelmed by the number of local residents. While such makeshift efforts are laudable, the region desperately needs a systematic and reliable means of meeting the healthcare needs of these people, including more specialized care such as mental health services.

We are also troubled by reports that your Department has not adequately kept the State of Louisiana informed regarding the details of your most recent plan as it was developing, and that much of the effort in the past several months was undertaken with little or no input from State and local officials. While we will reserve judgment on this concern, we would note that since holding last year's field hearing on healthcare recovery efforts in the Gulf region, the Department has provided the Subcommittee with little information regarding its efforts in this region.

Therefore, given our continuing concerns about the state of health care in Louisiana, and the New Orleans region in particular, we request that your staff brief us on your newly-announced plan and any additional measures you propose to improve the healthcare delivery system in that region. The Subcommittee anticipates holding hearings on both this plan specifically and the Department's efforts in the continued recovery efforts of the areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Due to the serious nature of this matter and the urgent needs of the region, we would appreciate your earliest attention to this request.

We look forward to continuing to work with you on this important issue. If you have any questions, please contact us, or have your staff contact Mr. Christopher Knauer of the Committee staff at (202) 225-2927.

Sincerely,



JOHN D. DINGELL
CHAIRMAN



BART STUPAK
CHAIRMAN
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT
AND INVESTIGATIONS

Attachments

The Honorable Michael O. Leavitt
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cc: The Honorable Joe Barton, Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Commerce

The Honorable Ed Whitfield, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations