



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
September 28, 2007

Contact: Jesse Broder Van Dyke
(202) 224-6361

AKAKA REVIEWS ROLE OF FEBs IN PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS

WASHINGTON, DC – U.S. Senator Daniel K. Akaka (D-HI), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia held an oversight hearing today to get an update on ways to improve the Federal Executive Boards' (FEBs) role in the preparedness of the federal workforce and urban areas in responding to an emergency and specifically a pandemic outbreak.

Witnesses at today's hearing included the Ms. Bernice Steinhardt, Director Strategic Issues, Government Accountability Office; Mr. Kevin Mahoney, Associate Director, Human Capital Leadership & Merit System Accountability Division, Office of Personnel Management; Mr. Art Cleaves, Regional Administrator, Region 1, Federal Emergency Management Agency; Mr. Ray Morris, Executive Director, Federal Executive Board of Minnesota; Ms. Kimberly Ainsworth, Executive Director, Greater Boston Federal Executive Board; and Mr. Michael Goin, Executive Director, Cleveland Federal Executive Board.

The following is Senator Akaka's opening statement for the hearing:

I would like to thank you all for joining us here today for this hearing on the role of Federal Executive Boards in the preparation and continuity of operations in the event of a pandemic influenza outbreak or other emergency.

Although we spend billions of dollars preparing the National Capital Region – the heart of our federal government – for emergencies, outbreaks, and potential terrorist attacks, more than eighty-five percent of the federal workforce is employed outside of the Washington, D.C. area. Next week, we will hear about pandemic preparedness in the NCR and the global surveillance tracking infectious diseases.

Today, we begin to look at the preparation of the federal workforce outside of the Nation's Capital and the support that FEBs can offer to those communities.

President Kennedy issued a Directive in 1961 to create FEBs and allow the heads of federal agencies in 10 regions around the country to come together to address human capital and emergency issues in those federal communities; there are now 28 Boards in 20 States including Hawaii.

We invited the Executive Director of the Honolulu-Pacific Federal Executive Board, Ms. Gloria Uyehara, to present testimony today, but regrettably she was unable to make the long trip.

FEBs are a quasi agency with no institutionalized structure and no dedicated source of funding. OPM oversees the FEBs, but the staff is usually employed by a local agency detailee. They do not receive specific appropriated funds. Some have an executive director. Some have no permanent staff at all. Each one of the 28 FEBs seems to have its own funding and operating structure.

A Government Accountability Office report concluded in 2004 that Federal Executive Boards could play a greater role in the coordination of emergency preparedness and response. Their latest report released in May of this year reaches the same conclusion with a particular focus on pandemic influenza preparedness.

GAO recommends the development of a strategic plan for FEBs to support emergency operations including dedicated funding and performance measurements. I understand that OPM has been working on a strategic plan and consulting with the Federal Emergency Management Agency. I look forward to hearing more about these efforts.

Public health experts at the World Health Organization believe that the world is due for a pandemic influenza outbreak. In the past 100 years, pandemic influenza has killed 43 million people around the world. Most recently, the Hong Kong flu killed 2 million people in 1968. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that a flu pandemic could kill between 2 and 7.4 million people worldwide.

Today, the threat of avian influenza or the H5N1 virus continues to rise. WHO reports that there have been 328 cases of infections in humans from South East Asia across the continent into Africa and the edges of Europe since 2003. Of those cases, 200 humans have died. While most cases of human infection of avian influenza are through contact with live poultry, in late August, a group of doctors confirmed for the first time the spread of the H5N1 virus from human to human in Indonesia.

There are treatments available, but there are also distinct challenges to emergency response for pandemic outbreak. Unlike one-time disasters, pandemics can last for an extended period of time, come in waves, and infect populations across a broad geographic area. They require the coordination of emergency response teams with health officials and community groups. Even more difficult, they can bring up sensitive issues of social distancing and treatment prioritization.

I don't expect that we will be able to address all of these issues at this hearing. I do, however, expect that our witnesses will shed light on a few fundamental questions: should FEBs play a role in responding to a single emergency event or pandemic influenza outbreak? And if so, what is their capacity to play a significant role?

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on the establishment of emergency response, continuity of operations, and pandemic preparedness and response plans in relation to Federal Executive Boards.