

PALLONE STATEMENT AT HEALTH HEARING ON THE VETERINARY PUBLIC HEALTH WORKFORCE EXPANSION ACT

January 23, 2008

"Good morning. We are here today to review HR 1232, the Veterinary Public Health Workforce Expansion Act. I would like to thank my colleague and chief sponsor of HR 1232, Ms. Baldwin, for her work on this bill.

"The United States is currently facing a significant shortage of veterinary medical officers. Our colleges of Veterinary Medicine produce only 2,500 graduates a year and are operating at full capacity. An estimated 50 percent of Public Health Service veterinarians are currently at retirement age. And the U.S Census Bureau predicts that, based on current population growth and the corresponding growth in animal populations, there will be a shortage of 15,000 veterinarians by 2025.

"These statistics are particularly alarming when taking into account that veterinarians not only perform routine animal care but they are also vital providers in the public health sector. Veterinarians work in Food Safety and Animal Disease Control, they work in the field of Biosecurity and Homeland Security, and they conduct crucial research on domestic and foreign animal diseases as well as on animal diseases that are transmitted from animals to humans.

"In fact, the American College of Veterinary Preventative Medicine actually requires its members to have proficiency in areas of public health including the fields of epidemiology and biostatistics, food safety, infectious and parasitic diseases, environmental health and toxicology, and public administration and health education.

"The steady threat of diseases such as West Nile Virus or Lyme disease, which is a particularly acute problem in my home state of New Jersey, as well as the recent outbreaks of food borne illnesses just amplify the importance of veterinarians serving in the Public Health sector and how they are becoming more and more crucial to protecting our citizens from devastating diseases.

"In fact, approximately 60 percent of infectious disease organisms are transmitted by animals and 75 percent of emerging infectious diseases are passed from animals to humans. The Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that food borne diseases such as Salmonella and E. coli are responsible for roughly 5,000 deaths a year.

"Improving the safety of our nation's food supply and reducing the number of food borne illnesses is a top priority for me and many of my colleagues. Accordingly, we have held hearings and Chairman Dingell and I have introduced legislation to bolster the regulatory framework at FDA, improving research and increasing FDA's oversight in order to prevent contamination of our nation's food supply.

"But there is only so much we can do from the regulatory perspective; we also need to support and increase the workforce who will carry out these tasks. HR 1232 would compliment our efforts thus far by strengthening the veterinary workforce we rely upon to conduct

surveillance and research into zoonotic diseases that threaten our food supply, as well as conduct important education and outreach initiatives associated with food animal production.

"This legislation looks to solve the impending veterinary shortage crisis by establishing a competitive grant program to expand capacity and services at veterinary schools. This would include increased teaching laboratories, research facilities, and classrooms and administrative space. This expansion will allow schools to increase enrollment and produce the next generation of veterinary medical officers.

"It has been 30 years since the federal government has provided funding to increase the number of veterinarians in our country. Considering the looming shortage of these critical public health specialists, now is the time for us to act once more. Again, I would like to thank Ms. Baldwin for her efforts on this cause and I would also like to thank our witnesses for appearing before us today to share their expertise. We look forward to hearing your testimony. I now recognize my colleague from Georgia, Mr. Deal, for five minutes for his opening statement."