March 1, 2022

The Honorable Charles Schumer  The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader Minority Leader
U.S. Senate U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510 Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Speaker Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515 Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Majority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and Minority Leaders McConnell and McCarthy:

On behalf of the Coalition to Stop Flu, a multi-stakeholder organization representing all aspects of the flu ecosystem, we call for urgent federal action to better protect Americans from influenza. It is imperative that Congress act now to prioritize critical investments in our public health infrastructure and health security programs to combat future seasonal outbreaks and the threat of an influenza pandemic. With increased and sustained federal funding, coupled with strategic policy measures, the U.S. can mitigate the severe consequences of seasonal and pandemic influenza and significantly reduce the risk of flu-related death.

As you know, influenza occurs seasonally each year, and throughout history has caused devastating pandemics. In fact, four of the eleven severe viral outbreaks in the last 100 years have been due to influenza: 1918, 1957, 1968, and 2009. In 2019, the White House Council of Economic Advisors issued a report estimating that seasonal flu costs the United States approximately $361 billion per year and that an influenza pandemic has the potential to cause $413 billion to $3.79 trillion in losses.¹ Experts remain concerned that the next pandemic will be an influenza pandemic.

The economic costs of the flu pale in comparison to the real human costs: loss of life and serious health consequences. In an average year, 12,000 – 52,000 Americans are killed and as many as 700,000 are hospitalized from the flu.² While the Covid-19 pandemic has overshadowed preparations for influenza, far too many of the same patients who are most vulnerable to Covid-19 also have the greatest risk of serious

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complications or death from the flu. The 2021-2022 influenza season has been mild so far, but the threat is far from over.

Our Coalition Members are public health and patient advocacy organizations; academic, scientific, and research organizations; health care professional organizations; emerging biotech companies; pharmacy organizations; and vaccine, antiviral, and diagnostic manufacturers. We are united in our concern about the threat of seasonal and pandemic influenza to our county’s health and security, particularly given the ongoing strain on our health care system as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Vaccination rates remain far too low, particularly in vulnerable populations, and we are concerned that fewer individuals infected with the flu are being properly diagnosed and treated.

We urge Congress to act on six strategic priorities designed to both better prepare our country for seasonal flu and to mitigate the potentially devastating impact of an influenza pandemic.

1. **Grow and sustain appropriations to support our country’s public health infrastructure**, including funds to support state and local health departments and funding for federal, state, and local public health data infrastructure and surveillance capabilities.

2. **Increase funding and prioritization of the development and procurement of novel influenza preventives, vaccines, antivirals, and diagnostics**, which are vital to the shared goal of ending influenza deaths. This includes investment in an up-to-date and diversified product portfolio in the Strategic National Stockpile that is sustained and replenished as needed over time, as well as the Pandemic Influenza Vaccines Stockpile, which is funded through BARDA’s Pandemic Influenza budget.

3. **Fully fund and implement the National Influenza Vaccine Modernization Strategy 2020-2030**, which focuses on:
   - Strengthening and diversifying domestic influenza vaccine development, manufacturing, and the supply chain;
   - Promoting innovative approaches and use of new technologies to detect, prevent, and treat influenza; and
   - Increasing influenza vaccine access and coverage across all populations.

4. **Adopt a budget mechanism to exempt core health care programs that are critical to our country’s national defense from annual budget caps**. This could take the form of a Health Defense Operations (HDO) designation, as proposed by nearly 50 public health, patient advocacy, research and biotech organizations. An HDO-like designation would operate as a safety valve to the

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annual spending limits to ensure our nation’s health and economic security is protected through sustained and adequate funding for health defense activities.

5. **Promote policies to raise influenza vaccination rates and take action to improve vaccine confidence.** This includes supporting policies to ensure that every individual has access to vaccines; federal procurement of vaccines at levels at least as high as in the 2020-21 flu season; improving messaging on flu awareness and disease burden; amplifying messaging on the benefits of vaccination; supporting policies and messaging related to the importance of continuing vaccination throughout the flu season; and supporting policies to broaden pharmacist immunization authority.

6. **Invest in pandemic preparedness** through increased funding and policy changes to ensure a strong supply chain and actions to strengthen domestic manufacturing, improve stockpile management, and improve distribution processes for vaccines, preventives, diagnostics, and antivirals.

Failure to act now will leave our nation ill-prepared to face the challenges of seasonal flu or an influenza pandemic. We must not minimize the heightened risks to our most vulnerable citizens of navigating another public health crisis without a sufficient public health infrastructure.

We urgently seek your leadership and are committed to working with you to protect Americans from another potentially devastating but certainly solvable public health crisis.

For more information, please contact Niki Carelli, Coalition Executive Director at niki@daschlegroup.com or visit http://www.flucoalition.org/.

Sincerely,

Tom Daschle
Chairman
Coalition to Stop Flu