



July 17, 2009

The Honorable Henry Waxman
Chairman
Committee on Energy and Commerce
2204 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Joe Barton
Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Commerce
2109 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Waxman and Ranking Member Barton,

On behalf of the nation's public health laboratories, I am writing to express our strong support for the public health workforce development and support for core public health infrastructure provisions of the America's Affordable Health Choices Act of 2009. Investing in state and local public health laboratories is critical to the health and wellness of the American people both in times of outbreaks of infectious diseases and in advancing prevention.

The outbreak of H1N1 influenza this spring highlighted many of the continuing and unparalleled challenges faced by the nation's State and local public health laboratories today. The unhappy confluence of years of minimal funding from all levels of government, an aging scientific workforce with few replacements in the pipeline and the burden of dramatic funding reductions because of the impact of the economic downturn on governmental revenues could have dealt a crippling blow to public health laboratory operations and the public's health.

Fortunately, that was avoided in this instance – but the response of public health laboratories to the outbreak was unsustainable and was greatly aided by the fact that there was no other major event, like a foodborne disease outbreak or natural disaster, occurring at the same time. It seems highly unlikely that we will be so lucky again, and luck is not a responsible strategy to build upon.

The Title II, Division C workforce recruitment and retention provisions provide a tremendous impetus to attract critically needed public health laboratory staff with their scholarship and loan repayment in return for service in governmental health departments. These science professionals are desperately need to improve the ability of the public health laboratories to maintain their basic operations and move toward a sustainable response to an outbreak of infectious disease or a natural disaster. The already meager staff of public health laboratories has been further reduced by almost 8 percent because of funding cut-backs caused by the economic downturn.

The Prevention and Wellness Trust in Title III of Division C will provide federal funding support for State and local public health prevention programs in a comprehensive approach to ensure that all Americans, regardless of where they live, can have access to the information and support they need to improve their health and that of their families. With its creation of a National Prevention and Wellness Strategy and new grant programs that will strengthen the ability of core public health infrastructure, the bill will dramatically improve the operations of State and local public health laboratories and their ability to provide a sustained response to multiple outbreaks.

The America's Affordable Health Choices Act of 2009 bill is a bright light on the horizon for State and local public health laboratories, and they are desperate for the benefits it will provide when enacted into law.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Scott J. Becker".

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Scott J. Becker, MS
Executive Director

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