

American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations



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October 20, 2014

Honorable Harry Reid
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510-4206

Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510-4206

Dear Majority Leader Reid and Minority Leader McConnell:

I am writing on behalf of union members and all workers to convey our deep concern about the present state of preparedness to protect workers and the public from the Ebola virus, and to request that the Congress work with the Administration to put in place mandatory national standards and other measures to ensure that workers and the public are protected.

The events of the past ten days in Texas have tested our health care institutions and systems and found them unprepared and unable to provide proper patient care or adequate protection to workers and the public. Existing protocols, standards and guidelines, and adherence to them, are deficient. One patient has died and two nurses have been infected by the Ebola virus. The failures in the response have put dozens of additional health care workers at risk, and potentially exposed many other workers and members of the public. These failures have created great uncertainty, anxiety and fear. This all has stemmed from just three cases of Ebola, making it clear that the country is unprepared to deal with a more extensive outbreak of Ebola or other serious infectious disease.

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The response to the Ebola virus must be led by the President working jointly with Congress. Immediate action is needed. The AFL-CIO has requested the President to take executive action to protect workers and the public by:

- Mandating uniform enforceable national standards to provide optimal protections to health care workers, and standards to provide appropriate protections for other workers who are at increased risk of exposure. Current Centers for Disease control (CDC) guidelines are deficient, particularly with respect to personal protective equipment, and only voluntary, and existing OSHA standards are limited.

Direct care nurses, front line hospital workers and emergency medical personnel must have the highest level of protective equipment. The standards for health care workers involved with direct patient care, should be as protective as those utilized by the Nebraska Medical Center personnel who treat patients with Ebola, and provide for powered air purifying respirators (PAPRs), full body suits and appropriate staffing protocols. These mandatory standards must require hands-on interactive training, including the proper donning and doffing of protective equipment. These standards should be developed jointly by the CDC, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Standards for other groups of workers at risk should be developed with the involvement of other appropriate agencies (e.g. Department of Transportation, (DOT), Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS)). All of these standards should be enforceable by OSHA and/or agencies with jurisdiction.

- Prohibiting retaliation against or discipline of workers who raise safety and health concerns and workers who contract the Ebola virus or are restricted or placed under quarantine.
- Providing for maintenance of wages and benefits for workers who are removed from their jobs due to Ebola exposure.
- Directing CDS, OSHA and other government agencies to seek input from workers and unions in the development of these standards and to establish ongoing communication to provide and exchange timely information on the latest developments related to Ebola exposure, transmission and control.

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We ask the Congress to provide whatever support is needed through funding and legislation to put these protections in place without delay.

There are hundreds of thousands of workers potentially at risk of Ebola exposure – health care workers, hospital support personnel, and emergency response workers who have been and will be on the frontlines of responding to new cases; airline workers (crew, ground and support personnel); Department of Defense civilian workers involved in the response; border patrol, customs and transportation security personnel; waste disposal, clean-up, and sanitation workers; and others. Protecting these workers is integral to protecting the public from exposure and stopping the spread of Ebola.

In addition to the measures we have outlined, action is needed to address the overall lack of preparedness for responding to a major infectious disease outbreak in this country. Increased federal funding is needed to restore the public health infrastructure and to respond to public health emergencies. Comprehensive standards to protect workers from all infectious disease agents must be issued. Health care institutions and other employers must develop and implement comprehensive emergency response plans and protocols, with the full involvement of workers and their unions.

As we address the Ebola threat in the United States, we must not lose sight of the Ebola crisis in West Africa, where thousands have died and the virus is raging out of control. The assistance that the United States is providing to this region is critical to stopping the spread of Ebola in Africa and globally. But all of us – here in this country and in other countries – must do more.

We stand ready to assist and work with you to protect workers and the public from this threat and to stop the spread of this deadly virus.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. L. Trumka', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Richard L. Trumka
President

RLT/PS/pb
Opeiu#2, aflcio