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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

December 11, 2012

Dr. Thomas R. Frieden, M.D. MPH
Director
1600 Clifton Rd NE
Centers For Disease Control And Prevention
Atlanta, Georgia 30329

Dear Dr. Frieden:

Thank you for taking the time to brief me on December 4, 2012 on efforts underway by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System (VAPHS) following the recent outbreak of Legionnaires' disease. I am grateful for your quick response to provide me information and ensure public health is protected for the veterans, workers, and visitors who access the VAPHS' University Drive hospital, Highland Drive facility, and H.J. Heinz campus in Aspinwall daily. With the Legionella bacteria remediation work now complete, I respectfully request further information pertaining to the following items as the efforts to uncover the root cause of the outbreak proceed.

- Veterans who have been diagnosed with Gulf War Syndrome or have been exposed to asbestos, burn pits, and Agent Orange suffer from chronic respiratory illnesses. Please advise if these veterans have an increased risk of contracting Legionnaires' disease and/or a higher mortality rate when exposed to Legionella bacteria?
- According to VAPHS officials, in the last twelve months, 29 cases of pneumonia at the University Drive hospital had an associated diagnosis of Legionella. Of those 29 cases, only five were affirmatively connected to the hospital's water supply. Other patients have come forward claiming to have contracted Legionnaires' disease after visits to the VAPHS' Aspinwall facility. Please review the remaining 24 cases to determine the likelihood those patients contracted Legionnaires' disease at one of the VAPHS facilities.
- It is my understanding the copper-silver ionization water system at the University Drive hospital is tested for elevated levels of Legionella bacteria once every two months. Nationally-recognized infectious disease experts have suggested the VAPHS should test the system monthly, and that a well-maintained copper-silver ionization system can in fact eliminate the threat of a Legionella bacteria outbreak. What is the recommended testing frequency for the University Drive system and was the system properly maintained?
- Documentation reflects the Department of Veterans Affairs closed the Legionella research laboratory at the VAPHS in 2006. Later, VA officials ordered the destruction of thousands of Legionella samples collected over 30 years. If these samples were available for testing, could the CDC have used those specimens to determine whether the newly discovered Legionella bacteria at VAPHS were resistant to disinfection methods and treatments?

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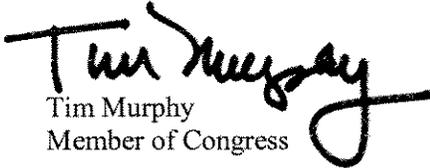
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- There have been press reports of recent Legionella cases at other Pittsburgh-area hospitals in the past 24 months. Please advise as to whether there is a broader public health concern, or if the Legionella outbreak is isolated only to facilities within the VAPHS.
- It is my understanding the VAPHS adopted all CDC recommendations to eliminate the presence of Legionella bacteria, but those efforts would only suffice in the near term and that the VAPHS would need to adopt a long-term solution. Moving forward, what strategies are recommended for the VAPHS to utilize to prevent a future Legionella bacteria outbreak?
- In 2002, VAPHS implemented a MRSA Reduction Initiative that reduced the incidence of hospital-acquired Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus by 80 percent over five years. Today, VA hospitals across the country have adopted this top-rated infection prevention model deployed first in Pittsburgh. In addition, based on legislation I authored, medical facilities are now required to publicly disclose rates of hospital-acquired infections, helping to shed light on a deadly and costly problem. As we build on these efforts, what additional strategies could hospitals like the VAPHS implement to eliminate the threat of hospital-acquired infections?

I thank you in advance for your timely response and stand ready to assist you in any way I can as we work to ensure Western Pennsylvania veterans receive the highest quality care at the VAPHS and other hospitals throughout the nation. I look forward to frequent communications with my office as the review process moves forward.

Sincerely,



Tim Murphy
Member of Congress

Cc: The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki, Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs