

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 23, 1976

Office of the White House Press Secretary

THE WHITE HOUSE

TEXT OF A LETTER FROM THE
PRESIDENT TO THE CHAIRMAN OF THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT,
INTERSTATE AND FOREIGN COMMERCE COMMITTEE,
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

July 23, 1976

Dear Paul:

I want to convey to you once again the strong commitment of this Administration to a National Influenza Immunization Program.

Almost four months ago to the day, I announced the initiation of this program after a panel of the country's top health, medical and scientific leaders unanimously recommended to me that we move forward. Those leaders convinced me that a strain of virus, popularly known as "swine flu", could threaten the health of our citizenry unless a massive, extraordinary program of national inoculations was immediately undertaken.

I requested a special appropriation of \$135 million from the Congress to ensure the production and distribution of sufficient swine-type influenza vaccine. I was gratified by the rapid response of the Congress in acting on my request and I signed it into law on April 15.

Since that time we have made significant progress toward our goal of making this vaccine available to all Americans before the onset of an influenza season this fall. Nearly 90 million doses of vaccine have already been produced; organizational efforts at the state and local levels for delivery of inoculations are well advanced; voluntary groups have been identified, briefed, and organized; and results of the largest pre-certification clinical field trials ever performed are very positive for the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine.

Despite these accomplishments, however, we now face a growing problem in making this public health program available to the American people.

Secretary Mathews reported to me yesterday afternoon that the providers of liability insurance for the vaccine manufacturers continue to resist our efforts to work out an agreement to provide insurance through normal commercial channels. It is their position that the inordinate size of this program makes it difficult if not impossible to accurately assess, and thereby reasonably insure, the potential hazards of administering the vaccine to everyone.

Although experience indicates that there is a very low risk of untoward reactions to influenza vaccine, we will continue to pursue an agreeable compromise with these

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companies. Without essential product liability coverage, the vaccine manufacturers are unwilling to release the vaccine for use in this national program. Secretary Mathews reported to me that unless this liability problem is resolved in the next few days, the manufacturers will terminate their production of swine flu vaccine. All of us would be derelict in our responsibilities to the American people if this program comes to a screeching halt.

In anticipation of just this situation, I directed Secretary Mathews on June 16 to submit legislation to the Congress to enable the government to assume a proper share of risks for the program, but not those resulting from negligence of the manufacturer. This measure is still under consideration by the Congress, but further delay, regardless of the reason, could result in the failure of this program to meet this essential public health need for all Americans.

I share the concern of the Congress that the vaccine manufacturers and insurers be held accountable. But my first concern is that a safe and effective vaccine be available to all Americans who want it during the flu season.

I am pleased that the Health and the Environment Subcommittee of the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee will hold another hearing on this important matter. I urge you to act immediately on my legislative proposal. We cannot accept the fact that the health of all Americans can be placed in jeopardy by a failure to take action on this important legislation.

While we await Congressional action -- and I trust that the Congress will act quickly with due regard for the Nation's health and safety -- I have directed Secretary Mathews to ask for the cooperation of the manufacturers again to ensure that they do not terminate their production of this vital vaccine while negotiations continue.

In conclusion, let me reiterate a single point: The threat of swine flu is very genuine. Data from both the scientific and medical communities support the need for an inoculation program. Clinical tests conducted to date show that the vaccine is both safe and effective. There is no excuse now to let this program -- a program that could affect the lives of many, many Americans -- bog down in petty wrangling. Let's work together to get on with the job.

Sincerely,

GERALD R. FORD

The Honorable Paul G. Rogers
 Chairman
 Subcommittee on Health
 and the Environment
 Interstate and Foreign Commerce
 Committee
 House of Representatives
 Washington, D.C. 20515

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