

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks During a Teleconference Call With State and Local Officials on United States Preparedness and Containment Efforts in Response to the West African Ebola Epidemic

October 8, 2014

Hey, everybody. Thanks for joining the call. Obviously, in your States and communities, you guys are on the frontlines of public health every single day, working to keep the American people healthy and safe. And I thank you for that.

Right now a lot of people's attention is focused on our efforts to prevent an Ebola outbreak in the United States. And I want everybody to know that from day one, this administration has made fighting Ebola a national security priority. We don't think this is just a humanitarian issue or a public health issue, this is a national security priority. And we are working aggressively to stop the epidemic in West Africa, to stop any cases in their tracks here at home.

On Monday, I met with my team to review our efforts. They're here today to update you on what we're doing, to answer your questions, make sure all of you have the information that you need to keep the people in your communities healthy and safe.

And the American people are reasonably concerned. Ebola is a terrible disease, and the fact that in an interconnected world infectious disease can be transported across borders is one of the reasons we have to take it seriously. At the same time—as I think all of us have tried to emphasize—it's important that, as public officials, we know and reinforce the facts. Because we've got a world-class medical system, because we've put in place tough safety measures, because of the work that many of you have done in conjunction with organizations like the CDC and dealing with infectious disease generally, and because of the nature of Ebola and the fact that it's not something involving airborne transmission, the chance of an Ebola outbreak in the United States remains extremely low.

Procedures are in place to evaluate anybody who might be showing symptoms. In recent months, thousands of travelers arrived here from West Africa, and so far, only one case of Ebola has been diagnosed in the United States, and that's the patient in Dallas who we know, sadly, passed away, and our thoughts today are with his family.

But as we saw in Dallas, we don't have a lot of margin for error. If we don't follow protocols and procedures that are put in place, then we're putting folks in our communities at risk. So we have to follow the procedures and protocols that have been established based on the science.

I want to thank Mayor Rawlings and County Judge Clay Jenkins in Dallas for their cooperation with our team and their leadership on the ground. We're going to make sure that lessons learned in Dallas and clear procedures and protocols for health and safety officials are conveyed to all of you. Secretary Burwell and Dr. Frieden will talk to you about how we're working with hospitals across the country so that local partners are truly prepared should someone who has a history of travel to the affected countries in West Africa start showing symptoms.

At the Federal level, we are always reviewing and evaluating measures that we currently have in place. Today we announced additional screening measures that will be phased in over the coming days and weeks at select airports around the country. And these measures are really just belt-and-suspenders: It's an added layer of protection on top of the procedures already in place at several airports.

The new measures will include additional entry screening and questions for travelers arriving from the countries affected by Ebola. It will give us the ability to isolate, evaluate, and monitor travelers as needed. And we'll be able to collect any contact information that's necessary. So you'll hear all of this from my team shortly.

But let me close by reminding everybody that America has got the best doctors in the world. We know how to deal with infectious disease. I'm confident that, so long as we work together and we're operating with an appropriate sense of urgency, that we will prevent an outbreak from happening here. And in fact, some of the work that we're doing together and the lessons learned from this experience will further strengthen our public health systems going into the future. Because there are going to be, unfortunately, other occasions where we know that there are infectious diseases out there, and in some cases, the transmission may be swifter, and we're going to have to be that much more ready.

So for the Governors and the mayors and the county officials on the line, I've instructed my teams to do whatever Federal assistance they can to make sure you're ready to respond should someone be diagnosed with Ebola in your State. We're going to have to be partners in this fight. Anybody who has any questions, information, or suggestions, that's why my team organized this call. They want to make sure that they're getting feedback from you in terms of what you think will be most helpful.

I want to thank you guys, not just for joining us on the call today, but, more importantly, for the critical work you do every day to keep us healthy and safe.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:24 p.m. from the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Thomas E. Duncan, who died of Ebola in Dallas, TX, on October 8; and Clay L. Jenkins, judge, Dallas County, TX.

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