



**For Immediate Release**  
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## **NEW SURGEON GENERAL CONFIRMED TO FILL OFFICE WITH INADEQUATE ROLE AND BUDGET**

*Health Group Calls for Strengthening Office of Surgeon General;  
Calls on Congress, Administration Not to Split Public Health and  
Bioterrorism Duties Under Homeland Security Plan*

**Washington, DC** – Dr. Richard Carmona, who was confirmed today by the U.S. Senate to become the nation's 17<sup>th</sup> Surgeon General, will soon discover that his office lacks the budget and authority to coordinate the nation's public health efforts -- much less prepare communities for possible acts of bioterrorism.

Moreover, as Dr. Carmona assumes his duties, committees in both the House and Senate are considering Homeland Security legislation that could potentially weaken the nation's public health infrastructure.

Trust for America's Health (TFAH), a nonprofit public health advocacy group, welcomed Dr. Carmona's experience in public health, and his intention to focus on disease prevention, as well as bioterrorism preparedness. TFAH has been advocating for nationwide tracking of chronic diseases like cancer and asthma and their potential links to environmental factors to better prevent diseases in the future.

However, the group noted that over the last four decades, the authority of the Surgeon General has been chipped away through reorganizations of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and a politicization of the confirmation process. Today, the office has a budget of just \$3 million and little or no authority to coordinate the federal government's public health activities.

"More than 50 different federal offices are involved in protecting public health," said Dr. Shelley Hearne, TFAH executive director. "At a time when chronic diseases like cancer are the greatest cause of death and disability in this country, when terrorists threaten our communities with potential biological and chemical attacks, we need a strengthened Surgeon General who can lead like a real general."

### **Homeland Security Plan Could Weaken Public Health Infrastructure**

On a related issue, TFAH also called on the Congress and the Administration to assure that legislation being considered to develop the new Department of Homeland Security does not transfer responsibility for bioterrorism preparedness from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

TFAH led a coalition of 30 public health groups that recently sent a letter to President Bush and Congressional leaders voicing their concerns about the Homeland Security plan. "The preparations required to respond to bioterrorism and naturally occurring health threats are indistinguishable," the letter says. "Both require the same strong public health infrastructure. ... From communications networks to disease surveillance, trained personnel and laboratory capacity, ... public health fundamentals must be refortified in a way that will address the full range of health threats facing our nation."

"The idea of separating bioterrorism preparedness from the rest of the nation's public health infrastructure is like separating the emergency room from the hospital," added Hearne. "Neither piece of the system will be stronger if this is done -- both will be weaker."

Hearne also noted that in a recent public opinion poll sponsored by her group, concern about biological and chemical terrorism ran high, but concern about everyday chronic diseases like cancer and heart disease was as high or higher.

"The public clearly wants greater protection from the broad array of health threats," Hearne said. "But unfortunately, the homeland security plan as currently envisioned would skew public health priorities and hamstring our ability to deal with both bioterrorism and other health threats."

Hearne added, "We need greater coordination and leadership, not a further weakening and division of public health protection."

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*The Trust for America's Health is a national non-profit organization whose mission is to protect the health and safety of all communities, especially those most at risk of environmental and other public health threats. For more information on this and other issues, visit [www.healthyamericans.org](http://www.healthyamericans.org).*