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CONTACT:

Alexis Marks or Mara Lee (Matsui) - (202) 225-7163

Christina Mulka (Durbin) - (202) 228-5643

Congresswoman Doris Matsui and Senator Richard Durbin Introduce Public Health Workforce Bill

Legislation Invests In the Future of the Public Health Workforce Through New Loan Repayment and Scholarship Program

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Representative Doris O. Matsui (D-CA) partnered today with Assistant Senate Majority Leader Richard J. Durbin (D-IL) to introduce the Public Health Workforce Development Act of 2009. This much-needed legislation addresses a looming shortage of public health workers across the United States, a shortage made all the more troubling by the recent worldwide outbreak of H1N1 influenza.

“The public health workforce is responsible for some of the most important tasks protecting the lives of Americans. This vital cache of workers helps keep California—and states across the nation—safe and secure,” said Representative Matsui. “After recent public health emergencies, we are keenly aware of the need to be vigilant in our efforts to prepare for potential and future outbreaks, and reaffirms the need for a public health workforce. I am glad to have Senator Durbin as an ally in the fight to ensure that we have an adequately trained, robust workforce to address any serious public health threats that lie ahead.”

“The recent outbreak of Influenza A H1N1 virus which infected thousands of Americans and caused nearly a hundred deaths worldwide demonstrates why an adequately prepared public health workforce is critical to protect the health of the nation,” said Senator Durbin. “Our nation’s ability to prevent, respond to, and recover from this threat as well as future challenges is largely dependent on a strong pipeline of public health professionals. This bill provides incentives to help recruit and retain these vital workers. We can no longer ignore our nation’s need for more qualified and dedicated public health workers.”

Despite the essential nature of the public health workforce, the number of public health employees is not keeping up with the national need. An aging workforce and uncompetitive public sector salaries are making it increasingly difficult to ensure that crucial positions in public health laboratories and community health centers are filled with qualified professionals. With the introduction of this legislation, Congresswoman Matsui has taken decisive action to reinforce the educational pipeline of public health workers, and to provide incentives for qualified graduates to pursue careers in this vital sector.

“As the growing ranks of uninsured Americans look to the public health system as a safety net and as the nation continues to deal with the recent H1N1 Influenza outbreak, we urgently need a strong public health workforce to answer these national challenges,” said Jeff Levi, Executive Director of Trust For America’s Health (TFAH). “Public health workers are vital to protecting our nation’s health and economy, but funding cuts and layoffs have stretched them too thin. This legislation would help stabilize and grow America’s public health labor force so that every American can count on the public health system when they need it. TFAH would like to thank Sen. Durbin and Rep. Matsui for their dedication to building a stronger public health system.”

The Public Health Preparedness Workforce Development Act pursues a multi-pronged strategy to develop the workforce pipeline that the public health system desperately needs:

- **Scholarships:** Creates a scholarship program for public health students in return for their service in public health professions after graduation.
- **Loan Repayment:** Establishes a program to help eligible public health workers re-pay student loans incurred during pursuit of public health degrees.
- **State and Local Loan Repayment:** Provides grants for State and local entities to set up their own loan repayment programs for public health workers.
- **Mid-Career Training Scholarships:** Authorizes scholarships for public health professionals to receive mid-career training and education in public health preparedness.
- **Public Health Opportunities Catalogue:** Directs the Office of Personnel Management to create an online catalogue of public health positions available in the Federal Government.
- **Academic Health Departments:** Authorizes a competitive grant program for partnerships between public health schools and State or local public health departments that establish academic health departments.

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