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Infectious Diseases Society of America

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October 28, 2013

The Honorable Bernie Sanders
Chairman, Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
332 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Burr
Ranking Member, Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
217 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Sanders and Burr:

On behalf of the Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSAs), I write in support of legislation that would require Veterans Administration (VA) healthcare facilities to report notifiable infectious disease cases to public health agencies, just as all states and most localities require all other healthcare facilities to do. We believe that such a law is urgently needed to ensure that public health officials are promptly alerted to disease outbreaks and to protect America's veterans and their communities.

IDSAs represents nearly 10,000 infectious diseases physicians and scientists devoted to patient care, prevention, public health, education, and research in the area of infectious diseases. Our members care for patients of all ages with serious infections, including meningitis, pneumonia, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, antibiotic-resistant bacterial infections such as those caused by methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), vancomycin-resistant enterococci (VRE) and Gram-negative bacterial infections such as those caused by *Acinetobacter baumannii*, *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, and emerging infections.

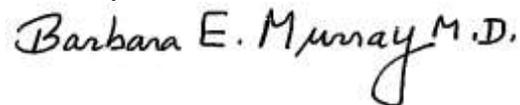
A robust infectious disease surveillance network requires a strong collaboration of federal, state, and local public health and healthcare entities. Without active and ongoing communication across jurisdictions, the public will continue to be at greater risk of infectious disease outbreaks. The 2011-2012 *Legionella* outbreak associated with the Pittsburgh VA is just one example of the danger posed to veterans, their families, and their communities by not reporting notifiable infectious diseases to public health entities. The first case of Legionnaires' disease definitively linked to the hospital was diagnosed a full year before the VA warned the public. In the end, 22 VA patients were infected in both the facility and the community, and at least five veterans died. Prompt reporting of such cases could help limit the spread of disease and the impact on patients.

To prevent tragedies like this from occurring again, IDSA calls upon the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee to quickly advance legislation that would require VA facilities to report to the appropriate entity each case of a notifiable infectious disease or condition that is diagnosed in accordance with the laws of the state in which the facility is located. Such a law would simply hold all VA health facilities to the standard that all other health facilities in the state must meet and thus ensure a stronger, better coordinated public health system. Ultimately, this requirement would improve the ability of federal, state, and local public health agencies to promptly respond to and contain deadly disease outbreaks in communities across the country.

We are encouraged that the VA has issued an internal directive requiring disease reporting and, indeed, many facilities have routinely done so. While this is a sign of good faith and a clear acknowledgment that such reporting accords with sound public health practice, we believe that a statutory requirement is necessary to ensure that all VA facilities report in a timely and accurate manner. However, we do not believe that VA facilities should be exposed to the threat of civil action, and we oppose including such a provision in legislation. The VA has clearly indicated its willingness to cooperate with a reporting law, and states have rarely, if ever, resorted to litigation to enforce notifiable infectious disease case reporting among non-VA healthcare facilities.

Thank you for your efforts to protect the health and wellbeing of veterans and their families. We would be happy to discuss this issue with you and your staff as you move this important legislation forward. Should you have any questions, please contact Jonathan Nurse, IDSA Director for Government Relations, at jnurse@idsociety.org or 703-299-0202.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Barbara E. Murray M.D." The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped 'y' at the end.

Barbara E. Murray, MD, FIDSA
President, IDSA

Cc: Senator Bob Casey