

Rep. Doris Matsui Tours County Health Lab Discusses Legislation To Address Shortages in Workforce

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Sacramento, CA - Today, Rep. Doris Matsui (CA-05) toured the Sacramento County Public Health Laboratory and met with California public health professionals. Rep. Matsui spoke to a crowd of students, professionals and members of the media about her legislation to address the growing shortages facing the public health workforce.

“When we are faced with trends and diseases that threaten our health and well-being, the public health workforce is there to ensure that we have the resources necessary to stay safe and healthy. We must fortify the ranks of these vital workers so that we are prepared to weather any risk to our public safety,” said Rep. Matsui.

Last month, Rep. Matsui introduced the Public Health Preparedness Workforce Development Act to address the critical and growing shortage of public health workers in America. The public health workforce is responsible for some of the most important tasks protecting the lives of ordinary Americans: managing the health system’s response to biological and chemical attacks, fighting food-borne illnesses, preventing the spread of communicable diseases and pandemics, and assisting communities in preparing for disasters.

Rep. Matsui became aware of the shortfall of the public health workforce when she met with constituents, who informed her that California was lacking enough Public Health Lab professionals. Upon further investigation, Rep. Matsui found that these shortages extended to the entire field, in California and across the nation.

Despite the essential nature of this 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 public health positions are filled with qualified professionals. With the introduction of this legislation, Matsui has taken action to reinforce the educational pipeline of public health workers, and to provide incentives for qualified graduates to pursue careers in this vital sector.

"Tackling the health implications of tobacco use, heart disease, obesity and physical inactivity, not to mention the threat of globally spreading infectious diseases, depends entirely on the availability of a well-trained public health workforce," said Dr. Linda Rosenstock, dean of the UCLA School of Public Health. "Rep. Matsui's legislation will take a significant step in strengthening the ranks of our public workforce."

The Public Health Preparedness Workforce Development Act pursues a multi-pronged strategy to develop the workforce pipeline that the public health system desperately needs. The legislation creates incentives for students and graduates in public health disciplines to enter the public health workforce. The legislation:

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.

Leading experts agree that the United States does not have enough trained public health workers today, and will have even fewer in the future, unless this shortage is addressed. This workforce is aging rapidly, and schools of public health are not generating sufficient numbers of graduates to replace retiring public health workers. Additionally, many public health graduates pursue careers that are more lucrative than joining the public health workforce.

The Matsui Public Health Preparedness Workforce Development Act has the backing of many industry professionals:

"Public Health departments at all levels of government are the front line in protecting the health of all Americans. As many Public Health workers wind up their careers, we need a new generation of leaders that will continue to work in diverse areas such as public health laboratories, disease investigation, maternal and child health, prevention, and health education. Congresswoman Matsui's bill goes a long way in helping young people choose the rewards of working in the various disciplines that constitute Public Health."

—Glennah Trochet, M.D., President Health Officers Association of California

"I am delighted to see the progress of this important piece of legislation. The critical and growing deficiency of public health practitioners has been recognized and well-documented, and this legislation will help address that deficiency. Society's public health needs are large and increasing. They cover everything from pre-natal and childhood health to improving the health and safety of our growing elderly population. The focus of public health is on prevention, which is in everyone's personal and economic interest,"

- Marc Schenker, M.D., M.P.H., Professor and Director Public Health School Planning, U.C. Davis

"The 'Public Health Preparedness Workforce Development Act of 2008' is a proactive intervention necessary to attract the scientists we need to rebuild the public health workforce. The outcome of this bill will be an increased ability of public health to protect the public from man's most feared communicable diseases. CAPHLD applauds Representative Matsui in her continuing support of the public health sector and the introduction of the 'Public Health Preparedness Workforce Development Act of 2008'."

- Dennis V. Ferrero, M.P.H., Executive Director, California Association of Public Health Laboratory Directors (CAPHLD)

"Our emerging public health work force crisis comes at a time when Americans are facing a host of risks to their health and safety, from bioterrorism to pandemic influenza and environmental disasters. At the same time, we risk losing ground on responding to ongoing health problems, such as obesity, heart disease and cancer. In order to protect the health of Americans, it is essential that we take the necessary steps to build our supply of trained professionals who will staff the frontlines in responding to public health threats and emergencies, as well as work each day to prevent disease and promote the health of our nation."

- Georges C. Benjamin, M.D., FACP, FACEP (E), executive director of the American Public Health Association (APHA)

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