

**Center for Foodborne Illness Research & Prevention**  
**Center for Science in the Public Interest – Consumer Federation of America**  
**Consumers Union – Food & Water Watch – National Consumers League**  
**STOP Foodborne Illness – The Pew Charitable Trusts**  
**Trust for America’s Health**

The Honorable Roy Blunt, Chair  
Senate Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services,  
Education and Related Agencies Appropriations  
260 Russell Senate Office Bldg  
Washington, D. C. 20510

May 26, 2015

Dear Chairman Blunt,

We, the undersigned health and consumer groups, are concerned about the low resources allocated in CDC’s budget to improve and maintain PulseNET, the national data based used to track foodborne illness outbreaks. We urge you to include an allocation of \$55 million for the CDC’s National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases’ food safety budget.<sup>1</sup>

Every year, one in six Americans are sickened with foodborne illness, resulting in 128,000 hospitalizations and 3,000 deaths. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), along with state public health departments, monitors reported foodborne illnesses so that the spread of these diseases can be contained.

Foodborne illness outbreak detection plays an important role in improving food safety. After the Jack-in-the-Box outbreak in 1993, the CDC established PulseNET, a database comprised of DNA “fingerprints” of bacteria isolated from patients and food. Since then, PulseNET, which receives data from over 650 laboratories, has compared thousands of DNA fingerprints, thereby providing information about foodborne illness outbreaks that would have otherwise gone undetected. As a result, PulseNET plays a vital role in removing contaminated food from commerce – for example, given PulseNET’s prompt detection of the 2011 cantaloupe listeriosis outbreak, food safety officials were able to contain the outbreak and additional illnesses and deaths were prevented.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Health and Human Services FY 2016. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Justification of Estimates for Appropriation Committees. Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases, p. 108. Accessed May 20, 2015 at:  
[http://www.cdc.gov/fmo/topic/Budget%20Information/appropriations\\_budget\\_form\\_pdf/FY2016\\_CDC\\_CJ\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/fmo/topic/Budget%20Information/appropriations_budget_form_pdf/FY2016_CDC_CJ_FINAL.pdf)

Newer technologies, which are faster and cheaper, are replacing the old-style “culture-based” testing. While these new rapid tests allow doctors to treat patients more quickly, the new tests do not require bacterial cultures, yet cultures are needed to identify the bacteria’s DNA “fingerprint.” As these “fingerprints” disappear with the use of more rapid non-cultured tests, so will our ability to detect and stop national outbreaks, thereby hindering our ability to prevent the spread of disease.

**PulseNET is a critical investment in public health and in the health of America’s families. A preliminary analysis by CDC estimated that more than 500,000 illnesses caused by *Campylobacter*, *Listeria monocytogenes* and *E. coli* O157:H7 were averted in 2010 alone, resulting in \$96 million in savings from the direct medical costs.** And these are conservative estimates. They do not include the cost of deaths, lost productivity or long-term health impacts – nor do they include the costs associated with *Salmonella*, our nation’s leading foodborne illness killer. Clearly, PulseNET is a sound investment in public health.

PulseNET has proven to be a powerful tool for foodborne illness surveillance and outbreak investigations. **We should not allow this vital public health database to disappear.**

To maintain CDC’s PulseNET database, we need to:

- Upgrade the infrastructure – PulseNET’s technology is 20 years old and needs upgraded.
- Increase funding to state laboratories to perform and upload cultured isolates into the PulseNET database – without the DNA fingerprints, PulseNet cannot connect human illnesses to specific food products.

The proposed FY 2016 increase for CDC’s Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases food safety budget (\$2.1 M) is not sufficient. That budget increase needs to be at least doubled if we hope to provide continuous improvement in foodborne illness surveillance.

***Investing in PulseNET is fiscally responsible and, in the long run, will save lives and dollars.***

Thank you for reading our comments on this very important public health issue.

Sincerely,

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