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## As Bush Administration Prepares to Vaccinate 500,000 Health Workers for Smallpox... **Nation's Largest Health Care Union Warns That, Without Better Safeguards, Plan Itself Poses Public Health Risks**

*Pregnant women, cancer patients, people who are HIV positive, and victims of certain skin conditions could be at particular risk without changes in plan*

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"If there is a smallpox threat, the nation needs a plan that doesn't make the risk worse. The administration's plan could have dangerous effects on public health and the safety of our nation's hospitals. President Bush and Congress have taken steps to protect the drug companies that produce the vaccine from liability, but they have not done enough to protect and care for health care workers, their families, and patients whose health the vaccine could affect."

*-- Andrew L. Stern, SEIU President*

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WASHINGTON, DC – As President Bush prepares to ask a half million health care workers to volunteer for smallpox vaccinations, the nation's largest union of health care workers has issued a strong warning that without better protections, the proposed plan could put hospital patients, caregivers, and the public at risk.

Last month, Congress passed legislation that will allow drug companies to avoid liability for producing the smallpox vaccine and prevent those administering it from being sued. But neither the legislation nor the plan President Bush is considering provides adequate protection for people who get sick as a result of receiving the vaccine or coming into contact with those who have been vaccinated.

"Health care workers want to be ready to respond in a safe way if a smallpox outbreak occurs," said Diane Sosne, RN, National Co-Chair of the SEIU Nurse Alliance. "President Bush must put better safeguards in place before anyone is asked to volunteer for the smallpox vaccine."

According to recent news reports, the White House is about to announce vaccinations for 500,000 hospital workers nationwide, followed by millions of firefighters, police, and other health and rescue personnel who would be first to respond in the event of an outbreak.

SEIU leaders will be meeting with federal, state, and local officials – including Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson – and working together with hospital management to urge them to enact a vaccine plan that will limit adverse effects and protect workers, patients, and the public.

***For details on health care workers' concerns, see the attached sheet.***

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## Will the Bush Smallpox Plan Make the Risks Worse?

The smallpox vaccine is “probably the least safe human vaccine” today, says Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. The U.S. government stopped mandatory smallpox vaccinations in 1972 because the rate of adverse effects, including death, was too high since there had not been a smallpox outbreak in this country since 1949. Today, Fauci estimates 30-50 million people have health conditions that put them at risk for side effects from the vaccine, a far greater number than 30 years ago.

**SEIU health care workers' concerns include the following:**

- **America’s smallpox vaccination plan must ensure that particularly vulnerable people are not given the vaccine and are not exposed to people who have been vaccinated**

The Center for Disease control says that many people, including pregnant women, people with weakened immune systems (ie: people being treated for cancer, those who are HIV positive or transplant patients) and people with eczema or other skin conditions should not receive the smallpox vaccine. (See <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/agent/smallpox/index.asp>)

Anyone volunteering to be vaccinated should receive free, confidential screening for these conditions to protect their health. The CDC recently estimated that 300,000 people are infected with HIV but don’t know it. They should also be advised that they could put people in their household with such conditions at risk if they receive the vaccine.

Patients with such conditions must be protected against accidental exposure to the vaccine through contact with hospital workers who have received it – and should be informed that workers recently have been vaccinated and made aware of safeguards that are put in place.

- **Workers should be educated about the risks and given the freedom to decline the vaccine without being subject to discrimination at work.** The smallpox vaccine contains the live vaccinia virus. The vaccine cannot transmit smallpox, but it could cause serious and life-threatening illnesses in vulnerable people who come in contact with the vaccine.

- **People who volunteer to receive the vaccine should not face loss of income if they cannot work as a result.** The CDC estimates that as many as half of those who are vaccinated will feel too sick to work and provide proper patient care for one or more days.
- Vaccine manufacturers and those who administer it have been offered immunity from liability in a proposal tucked into the Homeland Security Bill, so **a simple and fair compensation system – like the federal Vaccine Injury Compensation Fund – should be made available to assist anyone who is injured from receiving the vaccine or coming into contact with someone who received it.**
- **Unsafe needles must not be used.** Earlier this year, the federal government purchased 50 million conventional needles (sharps without safety protection) – which have been outlawed for such uses by the federal government and most states – to ship with the vaccine. Safer needles that would protect against HIV and hepatitis being transmitted from accidental needle sticks are available for only pennies more per needle.
- **Health care workers and others who are among the initial group of volunteers should be monitored and any adverse effects reported to and tracked by the federal government** so the public can fully evaluate the risk of the vaccine – especially since press reports indicate that President Bush plans to have millions more “first responders” vaccinated in the future, and the entire population by 2004.

*With 1.5 million members, SEIU is the largest union of health care workers in the United States and the largest union in the AFL-CIO. SEIU's members include 110,000 nurses and 20,000 doctors, many of whom work in hospitals and public health settings.*

**For more information about health care workers' concerns about the smallpox vaccination plan or to talk with a nurse or other hospital employee about the issue, contact TJ Michels at (202) 898-3321.**