

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

COMMITTEES:
COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND
TRANSPORTATION
FOREIGN RELATIONS
SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE
SMALL BUSINESS AND
ENTREPRENEURSHIP

January 29, 2016

Commissioner Kerlikowske
U.S. Customs and Border Protection
1300 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20229

Dear Commissioner Kerlikowske:

I have been alarmed by the World Health Organization's (WHO) pronouncements this week that the Zika virus is "spreading explosively" in Latin America, with early estimates suggesting up to 4 million people could be infected by this disease in the coming year. The situation has so alarmed the WHO that it will convene a special emergency meeting this coming Monday to decide whether to designate this outbreak a global public health emergency.

As you know I represent Florida, which is home to millions of people of Latin American descent, many of whom travel regularly to the region or have family, friends or business associates that come visit them here in the U.S. In fact, Miami International Airport is widely considered to be the United States' Gateway to the Americas, operating over 300 flights to and from Latin America on a typical day totaling over 43,000 passengers – more than any other U.S. airport. In addition, no other U.S. airport operates as many flights to and from Brazil, where the Zika virus is currently most prevalent, than Miami International Airport.

For years Miami International Airport has struggled with a severe shortage of U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) personnel to effectively process all the passengers and cargo coming through the airport in an efficient manner. Based on early reports about the Zika virus, along with the sheer volume of passenger travel and commerce that occurs between Florida and Latin America, the virus' "explosive spread" could further strain an already overburdened workforce at Florida's airports, especially Miami International Airport.

Earlier this week, a number of my Senate colleagues began requesting answers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Department of Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson about the risk posed by the virus and what preparedness efforts the federal government is undertaking.

Given CBP's frontline duties in processing passengers entering the U.S. from Latin America through Florida's various airports and seaports, I would like to know the following:

1. What steps is CBP taking to prepare for this outbreak, including the potential screening of travelers from affected areas, particularly in Florida's airports and seaports?

2. Is there a local inter-agency plan in place – involving CBP the CDC, and state and local agencies, among others – to ensure we are adequately prepared to protect the public health of passengers, airport and airline personnel, seaport and cruise line personnel, and the general public?
3. Based on recent high-profile failures of the federal government to adequately screen individuals coming into the U.S., what is CBP doing to ensure our airports and seaports, particularly at Miami International Airport, are properly staffed to deal with this situation?

Given the urgent nature of this virus' spread and its potential impact on public health and commerce, I look forward to your prompt reply.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'MR', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Marco Rubio
U.S. Senator