



Testimony on Lyme Disease Programs and Funding for the Department of Health

Hearing of the Senate Health & Human Services Committee

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Good morning Chairwoman Brooks, Chairman Haywood, and members of the Senate Health & Human Services Committee. My name is Ray Barishansky, and I serve as the Deputy Secretary for Health Preparedness and Community Protection at the Department of Health. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the Department of Health's efforts to fight against the spread of Lyme disease throughout the Commonwealth.

Each year, approximately 30,000 cases of Lyme disease are reported to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) by state health departments and the District of Columbia. However, due to limitations in investigations and reporting, the CDC has estimated that the number of Lyme disease cases actually diagnosed per year is around 300,000. Unfortunately, Pennsylvania is one of 16 high-incidence states and districts for Lyme disease, making it a significant issue in the commonwealth. Lyme disease is endemic to Pennsylvania, meaning that it is identified regularly throughout the entire state and cases occur in all 67 counties. Furthermore, the tick species that transmits the bacteria that causes Lyme disease is found in every county.

While we do not yet have finalized national numbers from the CDC for 2020, in 2019 Pennsylvania reported 9,008 confirmed and probable Lyme disease cases, with a corresponding incidence rate of 70 cases per 100,000 population. Pennsylvania is among the top ten states in the U.S. with respect to both total cases and incidence rate, cases per 100,000 population.

Since there is currently no vaccine available to humans that is effective against Lyme disease, prevention education is our primary tool to protect Pennsylvanians from contracting tick-borne diseases. To fund these important efforts, the 2020-21 enacted budget included \$2.5 million for Commonwealth agencies to address Lyme disease and other tick-borne diseases. Additionally, \$500,000 was also appropriated to fund the tick testing efforts of East Stroudsburg University. Of the total \$3 million appropriated for Lyme disease efforts, specific funding is assigned as follows:

Efforts	Amount
Education and Outreach	\$1,007,000
Testing Capabilities	\$130,000
Planning and Prevention	\$371,000
ESU Tick Testing and Public Outreach	\$500,000
Surveillance	\$915,000
Administration	\$77,000
Total	\$3,000,000

Unfortunately, since the Bureau of Epidemiology has had a primary role in the response to COVID-19, the global pandemic has impacted efforts against Lyme disease efforts. Due to the global pandemic, as of March 31, 2021, a total of \$1,084,197 of the appropriated SFY 2020-21 funding (\$3M) has been expended or committed. Further, due to the massive effort put forth to educate the citizens on Coronavirus, no media campaign efforts against Lyme disease were implemented.

However, DOH spearheads an interagency workgroup to coordinate the use of the state funding to improve surveillance, education, and prevention of Lyme disease and other tick-borne diseases. The department is implementing activities in line with the recommendations from the Lyme disease workgroup, including surveillance, prevention, and education.

As these efforts are all handled by the Bureau of Epidemiology, which has been a key component to the COVID-19 response, DOH will continue to conduct human surveillance for Lyme disease. Pennsylvania is working with CDC and other high-incidence Lyme disease states on evaluating a laboratory-only case definition proposal, this is to be considered this summer. This would decrease the surveillance burden by public health to allow those resources to focus on education and prevention. Additionally, this will make case counts less dependent on surveillance artifacts and more comparable to other jurisdictions as all high incidence areas will be conducting Lyme disease surveillance using the same method. For the public's benefit, summary Lyme disease reports are and will continue to be available on the Department's website. Residents can also create custom reports using the online tool, EDDIE.

Prevention and education efforts also are ongoing, as the Department continues to collect information regarding knowledge about Lyme disease, risk factors, and prevention methods among a sample of Pennsylvanians with confirmed or probable Lyme disease. The Department released an educational webinar for healthcare providers, available on PA TRAIN, which provides diagnosis, treatment and prevention information on Lyme and other tick-borne diseases of concern. The Department is also working with the Department of Environmental Protection and the Department of Agriculture to create a Community of Practice with other tick surveillance partners, including local and state agencies and academic partners.

The Department has prepared education materials for use in educating the public about Lyme disease. These materials will be disseminated throughout the state district offices to ensure Lyme disease educational materials and displays are consistent and readily available. Some educational materials will be available on the Department's website for use by the public to further educate and increase awareness of Lyme disease, and the Department will continue established collaborations with Boy Scout camps and expand educational activities to other local camps.

The Department also has worked to collaborate with the Department of Education on a Lyme disease poster contest to help educate elementary age children, one of the highest risk groups, about ticks and Lyme disease. This collaboration also included the development of an educational curriculum on ticks and Lyme disease, and this curriculum was distributed to all public and some private schools in the state targeted to first through sixth graders.

To further benefit the public, the Department's Bureau of Laboratories has capacity to provide Lyme disease testing, which helps to ensure access to testing for all citizens of the Commonwealth, regardless of insurance coverage. The Department is in the process of developing virtual educational materials, targeted to be released this summer, to provide information on ticks and Lyme disease during the pandemic, as well as to provide them to persons who may not be able to attend in-person education sessions once they resume. The Department has also developed a multi-media advertising campaign to educate Pennsylvanians about Lyme disease and how to limit their exposure.

As you can see, while the global pandemic has stymied our efforts, it has not stopped them. We know that we must continue the battle for public health on all fronts, of which Lyme disease is an important piece. Your highlighting of this topic is appreciated, and we look forward to working with you to continue to advance our goal of a healthy Pennsylvania for all. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before you and I am pleased to take any questions you may have.