



**Pan American
Health
Organization**



**World Health
Organization**
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE
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**OPENING REMARKS BY HON. SYLVIA MATHEWS BURWELL
SECRETARY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

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**55th Directing Council of PAHO
68th Session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Americas**

Thank you, Minister Menjivar, for your leadership as President of the Directing Council.

I also want to thank Dr. Margaret Chan, Director General of WHO, and Dr. Carissa Etienne for your leadership of PAHO.

Robert Kennedy once said: “Each nation has different obstacles and different goals, shaped by the vagaries of history and experience. Yet I am impressed, not by the diversity but by the closeness of their goals, their desires and their concerns, and their hope for the future.”

It is a privilege to stand with leaders who share a common hope for a healthier future.

Today, I want to touch on some of the obstacles we face on the path to that healthier future. And how, together, we can overcome them.

There is one challenge in our region that we have already been working with many of you to fight – the Zika virus.

There are more than 23,135 cases of Zika in the United States and in U.S. territories, and many more throughout our region.

In the United States, we have been working around the clock to fight the Zika virus.

We have partnered across the government and with private industry to improve diagnostics, find therapeutics, and develop safe and effective vaccines.

In August, scientists at our National Institutes of Health announced the start of Phase I trials on a Zika vaccine – reaching this important milestone nearly a decade faster than typical vaccines.

We've partnered with academic centers in Latin America and the Caribbean to learn about the risk an infection of the Zika virus poses to a pregnant woman and her child.

Recently, we launched a major international study called Zika in Infants and Pregnancy, or "ZIP" that's underway in countries and territories that are facing active transmission of the virus now.

We are committed to working closely with PAHO to help our entire region collectively respond to this virus.

I personally want to thank my fellow Ministers for your ongoing support of our research efforts.

In particular, I want to thank the Ministry of Health in Brazil for contributing over US\$1 million to fund the ZIP study.

While I was in Rio de Janeiro earlier this month, I had an opportunity to meet with some of Brazil's top scientists and medical experts, including the principal investigator for the ZIP study. I look forward to continuing our work together.

The Zika virus is a serious public health challenge – one that can leave an impact on families for years and decades to come. That is why we need to act with urgency today.

The history of global health threats has taught us that we will face new ones – whether from Zika or chikungunya, polio or antimicrobial resistance.

Infectious diseases will emerge and re-emerge. And so our defense needs to endure.

We have made some significant progress as a global community, especially through frameworks like the International Health Regulations and through initiatives like the Global Health Security Agenda.

And WHO has implemented voluntary Joint External Evaluations across all six of its regions to analyze how well we're all implementing the International Health Regulations, and to support country planning.

I am proud that the United States underwent its JEE in May and we found it very useful for evaluating our national capacities.

We encourage other countries to consider their own.

Our health security as a region depends on how well we fully implement the International Health Regulations.

When outbreaks do occur, we also need a global emergency response that is nimble, efficient, and effective. The reforms of the WHO and the UN system response architecture are promising steps in this direction.

These steps forward would have been impossible without the leadership of Dr. Chan.

I want to personally extend my sincere thanks for her dedication to public health and for all that she has done to make the world a safer and healthier place.

We need to ensure that the person elected as the next Director-General shares both the wisdom of experience and a passion for reform.

I began my remarks with one health threat that our region faces, and so I will conclude with another.

As you all know, our countries face a rising epidemic of deaths from drug overdose – particularly from prescription or illicit opioids.

In the United States, drug overdose deaths claim more lives each year than car crashes.

Addressing the opioid epidemic is a top priority for our nation. That is why President Obama has emphasized a public health approach to respond to this challenge.

But our strategy is most effective when it is part of a collective effort.

We saw the shape of that effort earlier this year in New York City at the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs. It was a milestone on our journey to fight this global problem of drug abuse.

With leaders from across oceans and continents, we committed to a balanced approach.

We agreed that our efforts would combine law enforcement and public health strategies guided by the best evidence, and the latest research.

And we agreed that we must cooperate across sectors in our own country – and across every member state of the United Nations.

When we come together, we can make incredible progress, even though we know there is more work ahead.

Because that “hope for the future” that Kennedy referred to – it’s a hope that we all share.

It is a hope that, through organizations like PAHO, we can realize for our lifetimes and for the lifetimes of our children.

Thank you
