

CPATH ♦ Center for Policy Analysis on Trade and Health

Bringing a Public Health Voice to Trade and Sustainable Development

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Public Health Officials Applaud Bill to Open Trade Committees

Van Hollen/Doggett Legislation Would Open USTR Committees to Public Scrutiny

Washington, D.C. -- Public health officials praised proposed legislation introduced by Reps. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) and Lloyd Doggett (D-TX) that would allow increased public health participation in the formation of trade bills. "Trade agreements have become a product of secrecy and smoky back-room deals. This bill lets in the sunlight, as the Obama Administration has pledged," stated Ellen R. Shaffer, Co-Director of the Center for Policy Analysis on Trade and Health (CPATH).

"Global trade agreements increasingly affect the public's health, from industrial farms that breed disease to the price of medicines and the safety of water supplies. Until now, the pharmaceutical, tobacco, processed foods and health insurance industries have had exclusive access to government trade negotiators," according to CPATH Co-Director Joe Brenner. CPATH has issued influential reports documenting the role of health-related industries and the absence of public health representation on U.S. trade advisory committees, and with partner public health organizations, has coordinated a national campaign for public health representation.

The Van Hollen-Doggett legislation calls for establishing a Public Health Advisory Committee on Trade with a strong presence by nongovernmental public health organizations on the second tier of the trade advisory system. The system has three tiers with the Advisory Committee for Trade Policy and Negotiations (ACTPN) on the top tier and the Industry Trade Advisory Committees (ITACs) on the lowest tier. The bill paves the way for greater public health representation on the ITACs.

"The current flu outbreak is a stark reminder of the importance of ensuring widespread access to affordable medicines both at home and among our trading partners," said Raymond C. Offenheiser, President of Oxfam America. "By giving the public health community a seat at the table, this bill is a vital step in making sure that our trade policy serves to promote public health for all."

"Trade and commerce shape our increasingly interconnected world," said Georges Benjamin, Executive Director of the American Public Health Association (APHA). "Done right, trade policies can not only expand economic opportunity, but can help promote and protect the health and well-being of the public and communities. We will all benefit from this important initiative and by including the public health community in these critical decisions."

"The United States can and should use trade negotiations to improve the health of people worldwide. Good trade policy can diminish trade in hazardous or unhealthy commodities, improve access to medicines, and ensure that governments worldwide can make laws that protect their own health and environment. The creation of the Public Health Advisory Committee on Trade is an important step toward U.S. leadership on trade and health," said Susanna Bohme, Deputy Editor, International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health and Chair, American Public Health

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Association Forum on Trade and Health.

"As an organization of 67,000 future physicians who strive for transparency and evidence-based decision-making in medicine, we are pleased at Representative van Hollen's and Doggett's leadership to bring a similar standard to the way our nation's leaders make trade decisions related to public health," according to Mary Carol Jennings, Legislative Director, American Medical Students Association.

"Almost a century ago, President Woodrow Wilson called for treaties to be 'open covenants, openly arrived at.' Today, with this bill, some of the secrecy and back room dealing with US trade agreements is lifted, with greater transparency for how trade agreements affect public health," said Kevin Outterson, Associate Professor and Director of the Health Law Program, Boston University School of Law.

"Kudos to Representatives van Hollen and Doggett for raising this issue in the Congress, and to CPATH for pursuing it. We have to bring real people into these advisory boards, which right now are largely repositories for corporate lobbyists and campaign contributors," said Jamie Love, Director of Knowledge Ecology International.

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