

## Subcommittee Report Finds CDC Has Failed to Protect the Public Health

(Washington, D.C.) – The **House Committee on Science and Technology Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight** released a [staff report](#) that details the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry's (ATSDR) handling of its response to high levels of formaldehyde in travel trailers provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to survivors of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Based upon Subcommittee staff interviews with agency officials and ATSDR's own internal documentation, the majority report offers a comprehensive account of ATSDR's mishandling of this public health crisis.

The report finds that: "The agency's incomplete and inadequate handling of their public health assessment, the failure to quickly and effectively correct their scientific mistakes and their reluctance to take appropriate corrective actions was all marked by notable inattention and *inaction* on the part of ATSDR's senior leadership. As a result, tens of thousands of Hurricane Katrina and Rita families living in trailers with elevated levels of formaldehyde were kept in harm's way for at least one year longer than necessary."

The ATSDR's mission, as stated on their website, is "to serve the public by using the best science, taking responsive public health actions, and providing trusted health information to prevent harmful exposures and disease related to toxic substances." ATSDR is a sister agency of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Top officials at ATSDR have denied involvement despite evidence to the contrary. In interviews with Subcommittee staff and during testimony before the Subcommittee at the

[April 1<sup>st</sup> hearing](#), Dr. Howard Frumkin, the Director of ATSDR, said he did not really focus on the formaldehyde issue until July 2007, when a congressional hearing drew his attention to it. Yet, documentation provided to the Subcommittee after the Subcommittee's April 1<sup>st</sup> hearing reveals that Dr. Frumkin had at least 13 separate meetings on the formaldehyde issue between January 2007 and July 2007.

In February 2007, ATSDR produced a health consultation for FEMA on formaldehyde levels in 96 new unoccupied travel trailers provided by FEMA to survivors of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The report was marred by scientific flaws and omissions, according to the Subcommittee Staff Report. Many of these issues were first flagged by Dr. Christopher De Rosa, then the Director of the Division of Toxicology and Environmental Medicine, when he first saw the report three weeks after it had been sent to FEMA.

Although the report was prepared by De Rosa's staff, he was unaware of the report because his staff was asked by FEMA to keep the report "confidential" and his staff was tasked directly by the Office of the Director of ATSDR on the formaldehyde issue. Drs. Frumkin and his deputy, Dr. Tom Sinks, have consistently maintained that their involvement in the formaldehyde health consultation was extremely limited, although they were only two of five ATSDR employees who ever saw the report before it was released to FEMA.

The Subcommittee staff report provides details on how Drs. Frumkin and Sinks, took concerted efforts to mask or ignore their own involvement in the formaldehyde study and instead attempted to push the blame for their fumbling of this critical public health document down the line to others, particularly Dr. De Rosa and his staff. Dr. Frumkin re-

moved Dr. De Rosa from his position as Director of the Division of Toxicology and Environmental Medicine in October 2007. Dr. De Rosa had successfully held that position for 16 years and the Subcommittee believes his removal was in retaliation for his persistent attempts to push the agency's leadership to take more substantive actions to protect the public's health from potential environmental hazards.

In numerous instances both Dr. Frumkin and Dr. Sinks, claimed that De Rosa's staff "took it upon themselves to engage" in the formaldehyde work for FEMA. In fact, Dr. Sinks personally authorized the agency's involvement in this work, and he acknowledged to Subcommittee staff during interviews that he had directly stated to agency staff that ATSDR should be "engaged" with FEMA on this issue. Drs. Frumkin and Sinks used this false assertion about De Rosa – just one of many – to help justify their "unsatisfactory" performance evaluation of Dr. De Rosa in a memo to a senior CDC official in Oct. 2007.

**Investigation and Oversight Subcommittee Chairman Rep. Brad Miller** said, "Howard Frumkin and Tom Sinks were every federal employee's nightmare of a boss. Their failures left thousands of people exposed to toxic levels of formaldehyde, and then they tried to push the blame down the ladder. Federal employees deserve better than that, and so does the public."

For more information, including the [staff report](#), please see the Committee's [website](#).

