



Position Statement Urging Action on Zika Virus

The American Psychoanalytic Association urges and supports immediate attention to the mental health consequences of the spread of the Zika virus. The World Health Organization and Centers for Disease Control consider this fast-developing international situation a public health emergency. Our membership, with its in-depth knowledge and expertise in child development, family dynamics, mental health throughout the lifespan, and group dynamics, believes that much must be done psychologically to prepare for this possible epidemic. As psychoanalysts who know the dangers of emotionally based denial, we urge our community leaders to publicly acknowledge and proactively address the rapidly spreading emergency.

Much remains uncertain and unknown about the virus, its means of transmission, its medical implications. As necessary and appropriate public health, individual, and community responses are developed, monitoring and addressing anxiety and alarm is essential.

- Acknowledging the uncertainty, and recognizing the stress, anxiety, fear or dread people feel;
- Informing the public through clear, regular reports of what is known as it develops, what to expect, and what is being done to combat the virus and address consequences of infection;
- Addressing misinformation and rumors quickly with clear reasons and facts;
- Involving people in taking actions to protect themselves and their communities and to facilitate difficult personal and communal choices; taking purposeful action is important as officials search for answers that will reduce uncertainty.
- Supporting the hardiness and resilience of individuals and the population as a whole, targeting vulnerable groups in particular.

Factors facilitating infection that could cause an epidemic include travel by forty million Americans and 500,000 pregnant women annually to two dozen countries where the virus is spreading. The virus is known to be transmitted by a mosquito which has extended its range in the United States from the South to states as far north as Illinois and Pennsylvania and, in pockets, as far west as California. The mosquito thrives especially in densely populated urban areas.

While the effects of infection on the bearer of the virus are usually mild – we note that only one in five of those infected is symptomatic – the potential consequences to the fetuses of infected pregnant women are severe. A strong correlation has been found between infection by the Zika virus and a surge of births of infants with microcephaly. Lifetime disability results.

There are multiple public health implications of Zika infections, including adult neurological disorders such as the Guillain Barre Syndrome. The U.S. subpopulation known to be uniquely in danger is our country's girls and women. Pregnancy and motherhood are core developmental issue for most girls and women. Being uncertain about a healthy pregnancy and offspring affects one's development, identity, and choices. These psychological burdens will increase should the crisis reach epidemic proportions. We must prepare to provide group spaces where our girls, women – and families – can address the

psychological and practical implications of the situation. The institutions involved must include our schools, religious communities, health care providers, and mental health community. Protocols must be developed and funding must be provided, for the health of our girls and women, their families and epidemic-burdened communities.

As we face the mental health implications of the spread of the Zika virus, our nation must provide adequate funding for the education and counseling of women. Millions will fear deformities of their babies, should they become infected during pregnancy. Should they choose an abortion, legal and accessible services now in short supply must be much more available, regardless of geographic location or income level. Should they choose to carry the fetus to term, and should the offspring suffer from microcephaly, the public health cost and the cost to our workforce could be significant. Immediate studies of the economic costs and preparations for mobilization of needed psychological, social and medical services are critical.