

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Ranking Member Kathy Castor

Hearing on "Looking Back Before Moving Forward: Assessing CDC's Failures in Fulfilling its Mission"

June 7, 2023

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

In the five months since the start of the Republican majority in the House, this subcommittee has held several hearings that seem geared more toward undermining public health and the professionals working to protect our neighbors than constructive oversight and improvements to public health partnerships.

This is concerning for many reasons.

It irresponsibly ignores the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, which took the lives of over 1 million Americans, and diminishes the importance of a strong public health network across America. The pandemic exposed weaknesses and inefficiencies in our existing infrastructure that put us at a disadvantage to adequately respond from the start.

We also saw firsthand how the COVID-19 crisis was further fueled by then-President Trump's early insistence that the virus was not serious – a message that contradicted what health officials were seeing on the ground.

During a critical period, we lost time that we couldn't afford in getting a handle on the size and scope of the deadly pandemic.

Disinformation also ran rampant. In my home state of Florida, Governor DeSantis and his administration spread disinformation and vilified scientists who were recommending ways to protect everyone from the deadly virus. The state withheld and censored data on nursing home infections and deaths, overall mortality data, and other valuable information, causing confusion on a local, state, and federal level. Unlike other states, many more Floridians died after the vaccine was widely available.

How can public health officials combat a pandemic if political leaders are actively undermining their efforts to protect and inform the public?

These are the sort of historical facts that cannot be ignored when we assess the government response to COVID-19 and set priorities moving forward.

Federal health agencies are our first line of defense against the next threat, and we need to take an honest, holistic look at their responses to public health challenges. For example, in recent hearings with leaders of federal health agencies, they have told us that preparedness needs to be a centerpiece of future plans.

Even today, we are using our knowledge from COVID-19 to monitor and respond to mpox as cases tick back up.

Everyone acknowledges that improvements are needed. The CDC took initiative to conduct an internal review and is pursuing a Moving Forward plan aimed at making the agency more resilient and accountable to the American people. If you are a critic of CDC for its response to COVID-19, this should be a welcome development. I certainly look forward to hearing more as this reorganization continues. And I appreciated the bipartisan visit to CDC headquarters in Atlanta last year where we discussed needed improvements.

In addition to the descriptions of the improvement process on CDC's website, CDC has also provided a letter (that I would like to include in the record) describing in more detail just how thoughtful and extensive their efforts have been. Hundreds of employees have participated and generated recommendations. Outside experts and stakeholders have provided feedback and been briefed. In short, CDC continues to apply the hard lessons learned, and we must support that effort.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank the outgoing CDC director, Dr. Walensky, for her tireless work under incredibly challenging conditions. She inherited a terrible situation—when she took office, there were nearly 100,000 COVID-19 hospitalizations per week and 25,000 deaths per week. We are now under 10,000 new hospitalizations per week and 500 deaths per week. Schools reopened safely under her watch. Despite politicization and misinformation, Americans got vaccinated. I thank her and the dedicated public servants at CDC who work every day to keep us healthy.

Last month, CDC Director Walensky testified before the Health Subcommittee and further detailed the reorganization initiative, saying it aims to “eliminate bureaucratic reporting layers, break down silos in the agency, promote foundational public health capabilities, and improve accountability at CDC.”

The CDC cannot do it alone. Congress must step up in its role to improve the nation's public health. That includes investing in the data modernization we need at the local level -- improving CDC's ability to collect and act upon timely and complete health data rather than a patchwork system. This will ensure that our local partners, hospitals and communities have the best information, based on solid science, to make decisions.

We will not be successful if Republicans in Congress continue to target public health for large budget cuts. I am deeply disappointed that House Republicans insisted on rescinding funds for public health efforts in exchange for not destroying the U.S. economy last week. This rescission of funds only worsens the challenges we face in protecting the health and safety of our

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neighbors. These are the challenges that my colleagues claim they want to solve. They cannot have it both ways.

The Biden Administration and Democrats in Congress, however, will remain focused on providing health institutions the necessary support and resources they need to be more prepared and responsive to future health emergencies.

I urge our Republican colleagues to join us.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.