

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Health Ranking Member Anna Eshoo

Hearing on “The Federal Response to COVID-19”

February 8, 2023

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and good morning, to the witnesses, thank you for being here today.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus a pandemic.

Now, three years later, we have the benefit of hindsight and we know we were unprepared. We lost one million precious souls in our country... grandparents, mothers, fathers, siblings, and even some of our colleagues. Now we have to do everything possible to prepare our nation for new and emerging threats to public health.

We have to learn from the mistakes made, including:

The faulty coronavirus testing kits that the CDC insisted on developing on their own which allowed infections to spread undetected.

The bare cupboards of the Strategic National Stockpile leading to our nation’s heroic health care workers wearing trash bags as protection.

A long legacy of racial health disparities and a weak social safety net that allowed the virus to disproportionately infect and kill Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous people.

A chronically underfunded public health system whose poor data undercut the government’s response to Covid; and

Confusing and opaque public health communications which bad actors took advantage of to spread misinformation and discourage life-saving vaccinations.

It’s also clear where the federal government succeeded in its response:

Because of the work NIH was already doing when the pandemic began, researchers were able to develop a safe, highly effective vaccine for the new virus very quickly. Covid vaccines have resulted in 120 million fewer infections, 18.5 million fewer hospitalizations, and 3.2 million lives saved.

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Nimble decision-making by the federal government and Congress allowed more Americans to get health coverage, Medicare to cover telehealth and at-home care, and the FDA to use emergency authorizations and flexible clinical trial designs to provide treatments and vaccines quickly.

Three years later, our nation is finally recovering from the pandemic. Now we have to incorporate the lessons we've learned to strengthen our public health infrastructure before a new threat is upon us. Our nation's health and security depend on this.

I look forward to the testimony from the three heads of the agencies that are here today, and that their testimony be highly instructive to us on how we can improve our federal response going forward.

And with that Mr. Chairman I yield back the balance of my time.