

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.

Oversight and Investigations and Health Subcommittee Joint Hearing on “The Federal Response to COVID-19”

February 8, 2023

Today, we will hear from the government officials leading both the ongoing COVID-19 recovery and the efforts to bolster the nation’s public health system for the long term, which is our best defense against future pandemics.

This is no simple task.

When President Biden came into office, he inherited a year-old pandemic from the Trump Administration during which public health experts were routinely ignored and maligned, hamstringing the government’s ability to respond.

Deaths were soaring faster and those involved in COVID-19 response were frequently forced to correct President Trump’s misinformation about the virus, which distracted from the important goals for distributing newly authorized vaccines.

It is unfortunate that a national emergency so quickly turned into a partisan issue at a time when we most needed to come together.

Over the last two years, a Democratic Congress and the Biden Administration invested in a nationwide vaccine campaign and COVID test distribution that accelerated our recovery.

After facing new challenges from more aggressive COVID-19 variants, death rates and hospitalization have once again fallen across the nation. However, we must continue to be vigilant and monitor new variants, improve vaccination rates, and ensure that an uptick in cases does not occur.

At the same time, we know that COVID-19 is not the last pandemic we will face, and we need to be sure we are incorporating the lessons learned from the pandemic into our public health infrastructure. Today, we will hear agency plans to do just that.

A strong public health response includes effective communication and access to accurate, reliable information. It includes consistent investment in scientific research that leads to development of safe and effective vaccines and treatments. It includes establishing partnerships between the federal, state, and local governments and the private sector to ensure a smooth response when a public health threat arises.

We must also address the racial and ethnic disparities that affect our ability to mount an equitable response to a pandemic. These inequalities predated COVID-19, but were magnified during the pandemic. It is unacceptable in this day and age that the burden of death and disease continues to fall disproportionately on people of color.

Unfortunately, later today we are taking up yet another partisan bill on the House floor that does nothing to strengthen our public health infrastructure or make people safer and healthier. In fact, H.R. 185 seems designed to further undermine trust in our public health officials and confidence in our lifesaving vaccines. This bill also did not go through this Committee, but rather was rushed to the floor as a political stunt.

When Republicans put politics over science it seriously undermines our ability to combat this pandemic and the hard work these public health agencies do every day.

I hope that we can get back to the business of regular order, of the Committee taking on the nation's challenges in a thoughtful, bipartisan manner. One step we must take this year is reauthorizing the Pandemic and All Hazards Preparedness Act, which is set to expire in September.

PAHPA has been a bipartisan effort in the past, and I hope that we can be guided by that precedent so that we can make sure that our nation is in the strongest position to address a future crisis.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.