

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

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

June 7, 2023

Let's call this hearing what it is – an opportunity for Committee Republicans to criticize the work of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention during the COVID-19 pandemic without them being here. CDC Director Walensky testified before this Subcommittee in February along with leaders of the other key public health agencies. She then testified before the Health Subcommittee last month.

While I appreciate the witnesses for being here and look forward to their testimony, if Republicans were really interested in conducting oversight of the CDC, they would have invited the CDC to be here today. That clearly was not their goal. Republicans just wanted another venue to continue their attack against the CDC.

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented challenge for the nation. From the outset, there was uncertainty and confusion and a total lack of leadership. If we're going to take a look back, let's start by going back to the beginning of the pandemic and looking right at the top—then President Donald Trump. We all remember him repeatedly casting doubt about the dangers of COVID-19 right from the start.

- In January of 2020, he said that it was, “one person coming in from China, and we have it under control. It's going to be just fine.”
- He praised the efforts of the Chinese government, saying, “It will all work out well. In particular, on behalf of the American People, I want to thank President Xi.”
- At the end of February 2020, he said that cases would, “be down to close to zero,” and that, “one day, it's like a miracle, it will disappear.”
- He publicly promoted hydroxychloroquine as a treatment. He asked whether disinfectant could be injected. He pondered whether UV light, “inside the body” would cure people.
- In June when the virus was killing hundreds of people every day, he said, “It's fading away” and “the numbers are starting to get very good.”
- He admitted that he, “said to my people ‘slow the testing down, please.’”

This is just a small sample of the anti-science misinformation that President Trump spread during the first year of the pandemic. This misinformation seriously undercut our public health institutions, including the CDC, who were doing difficult work under impossible circumstances.

Certainly, there are lessons to be learned, and CDC has acknowledged the need for reforms. It is implementing over 100 recommendations that were developed based on the feedback of

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hundreds of CDC staffers and is also reorganizing to be more efficient and responsive when facing future threats. Last month, CDC Director Walensky further detailed the CDC's plans during her appearance before the Health Subcommittee. She said the agency's Moving Forward initiative aims to, "eliminate bureaucratic reporting layers, break down silos in the agency, promote foundational public health capabilities, and improve accountability at CDC." We look forward to hearing more from CDC as it continues that process.

The Committee is also in the process of reauthorizing the Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness Act – the first opportunity to review PAHPA since COVID-19. It's clear that CDC needs additional authorities, including public health data authority, to be better prepared in the future. We also need to strengthen our drug and medical device supply chains, which have known vulnerabilities that would be exacerbated by another pandemic. Unfortunately, it seems the Republican majority is not interested in these approaches to better prepare for the next pandemic, but instead is focused on tearing down public health institutions.

That's extremely disappointing. We should be working together to strengthen our nation's health agencies for the future and enable them to institute reforms that will improve future pandemic response. I'm hoping we will be able to do that in the future, but it's clear that's not the Republican's goal right now.

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