Committee on Energy and Commerce

Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.

Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee Hearing on "Challenges and Opportunities to Investigating the Origins of Pandemics and Other Biological Events."

February 1, 2023

I welcome this opportunity to begin what I hope will be a constructive Congress overseeing the ongoing response to COVID-19 and evaluating lessons learned so that we can be ready to prevent and tackle future biological threats facing Americans.

As we know all too well from COVID-19, biological threats are persistent. They are likely to become even more common due to climate change, urbanization, and globalization. In order to improve our response to future pandemics, it is critical that health care experts are able to research viruses and where they come from in order to quickly identify, sequence, and understand emerging diseases. This research allows us to develop countermeasures to help prevent death and disease.

None of this is possible without ongoing, long-term government support for scientific research. As an example, it was Congress's decades-long investments in basic research that enabled virologists and researchers to develop safe and reliable COVID-19 therapeutics and vaccines in record speed.

And now the Biden Administration is taking it one step further with the implementation of its National Biodefense Strategy. This strategy presents another opportunity to encourage collaboration among government and research sectors, enhance our capacity to prevent biological incidents before they happen, and respond to pandemics when they occur.

The White House Office of Science and Technology Policy recently convened a group of experts in immunology and virology to discuss how to develop our national expertise in identifying pandemic origins. I understand that at least one of our witnesses was in attendance, and I look forward to hearing about how Congress can further support productive collaboration between the research community and government in the future.

It is important to remember that any inquiry into the origins of pandemics is merely one component of a broader strategy to protect Americans from viral disease and prevent future virological episodes. Therefore, as we discuss the origins inquiry, I think we should keep a couple of principles in mind.

First, investigating pandemic origins is useful insofar as it helps us fulfill government's primary responsibility: protecting the health and well-being of citizens. Understanding past pandemics is essential to understanding future ones. For example, as our witnesses describe in

their written testimonies, lessons learned from the studies of SARS 1, MERS, and H1N1 gave us the tools and infrastructure to quickly understand SARS-COV-2 during the early COVID-19 outbreak. The lessons learned also enabled the record-speed development of monoclonal antibodies and drug therapies. Unfortunately, it is only a matter of time before the next pandemic occurs, and it is critical that we apply the lessons that the research community has learned from COVID-19 to refine our abilities to identify, prevent, and respond to biological threats.

Second, we must incorporate origin investigations into wholistic funding and support of our public health infrastructure. This includes everything from strengthening our health care system, tackling the increase in zoonotic health risks caused by climate change, and creating an enabling environment for research and scientific collaboration.

Third, we must keep politics out of any investigation. Instead, it must be guided by science and evidence rather than conjecture and speculation. I have deep concerns that any origins investigation will turn political which would be extremely harmful to public health.

As a recent report by the Government Accountability Office found, the current acrimony surrounding the overly partisan rhetoric of the COVID-19 origins debate could push researchers out of the field just at a time when we need this critical workforce to be strong. Broad-based research bans and moratoria have taken the place of constructive conversations about improvements to biosecurity.

This has put a chilling effect on research that the American people depend on to retain our competitive edge globally and to achieve medical and scientific breakthroughs. If we're not following the right evidence, we won't learn the right lessons. Democrats are committed to following the scientific evidence to where it leads us so that we can make sure that any origins inquiry leads to tangible improvements in the life of Americans.

I welcome this opportunity to examine the remaining barriers to properly identifying pandemic origins as part of our broader efforts to protect the health and well-being of Americans.