Committee on Energy and Commerce

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

Hearing on "The Biosafety of Risky Research: Examining if Science is Outpacing Policy and Safety."

April 27, 2023

When the coronavirus pandemic began, many researchers with the training and expertise to examine dangerous viruses put their research on hold to tackle the pandemic. The lab infrastructure that was in place and the research community were essential in identifying the virus, how it worked, and how we could slow its spread and limit its ability to harm Americans. The public saw the benefits of this research in real time, with vaccinations becoming available at an unprecedented pace.

We will hear a lot today about the risk of certain kinds of research and it is important that we examine those risks. At the same time, we need to understand the benefits of certain research in preventing and responding to pandemics. We also need to discuss the training and safety measures that are already in place in high-containment labs to reduce risk.

Thanks to the investments that had been made in research, the scientific community was able to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in record time. This included scientists at our public institutions as well as those in the private sector. It was a global effort to solve a global problem. We should take immense pride in the extent and quality of America's scientific contributions toward understanding and addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the many lessons that we should take away from the pandemic is that a well-resourced and well-trained scientific community is essential if we are to have any hope of preventing and defeating future pandemics.

Studying dangerous pathogens requires carefully considered protocols and persistent oversight to ensure that the work is conducted safely. When it comes to risk, the researchers working in high-containment labs are those who have the most to lose when laboratories are not adequately maintained, corners are cut, or safety protocols are insufficient. They are the ones who are literally in the room with dangerous pathogens so they can study how the pathogens threaten us and how we can protect ourselves.

We must ensure that scientists feel free to speak up about any concerns they have that could help improve lab safety. But I am very concerned that the tenor of the current debate on lab safety is having a chilling effect on scientific research and among the scientists at the forefront of disease prevention and response.

We have seen scientists, including some of our top public health officials, maligned, marginalized, taken out of context, and accused of covering up the origins of COVID-19. These

actions are harmful and counterproductive because we must have scientists at the table if we want to stay world leaders in science and research and if we want researchers to feel comfortable raising safety concerns.

I'm pleased we have witnesses at the table today who can help us understand what is working well already and where there may be a need for additional transparency, consistency in safety regulation, or oversight.

The Biden Administration and House Democrats have taken important steps toward increasing biosafety and biosecurity. Last year's Consolidated Appropriations Act contained numerous important provisions to improve biosafety, but no Republican on this Committee today supported that legislation.

And just yesterday, the House Republican majority jammed through their Default on America Act that would strip funding from important programs that could assist with pandemic preparedness and biosafety. It also strips COVID-19 treatment and vaccine development funds and threatens U.S.-based medical manufacturing. With this legislation, House Republicans are threatening a default crisis that would devastate everyday Americans.

I hope today's hearing demonstrates why continuous investment, rather than misguided funding cuts, is essential to prevent pandemics and respond swiftly when they occur.