

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

Hearing on “Unmasking Challenges CDC Faces in Rebuilding Trust Amid Respiratory Illness Season”

November 30, 2023

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you for being here, Dr. Cohen. I look forward to your testimony today and to working with you on all the important issues that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is tackling.

Particularly at this time of year, it is critical that we make every effort to extend access to vaccines against seasonal respiratory illnesses to all Americans. With new options and new methods of vaccine delivery, it takes a coordinated effort between the CDC, local health departments, and those who are on the ground distributing and administering these vaccines. Right now, COVID-19 vaccines are being distributed commercially and not by the government for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic. The RSV vaccine is also now available for the first time for older Americans. It is critical that we communicate a clear message to Americans about where and how to get vaccinated to protect themselves and their families from respiratory illness.

The CDC has produced a comprehensive campaign to inform the American people about the availability of the COVID-19, influenza, and RSV vaccines. Providing clear guidance based on the best available science is core to CDC’s mission, and it is encouraging to see you personally contributing to this campaign, Dr. Cohen.

Congress must also do its part. We must ensure that CDC has the resources and authorities needed to best serve the American people and protect our health and well-being.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed systemic shortcomings in our public health infrastructure and preparedness that we must address. But instead of coming together to advance a bipartisan Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness Act reauthorization that applies the hard lessons learned from the pandemic, our Republican colleagues pushed an inadequate and partisan reauthorization through this Committee. I continue to be astonished and disappointed that we still can’t agree on the hard lessons learned during the pandemic. The very title of this hearing shows my Republican colleagues’ disdain for masks, which were an important and effective tool in reducing the spread of a deadly virus. It’s unfortunate that a rejection of science seems to have taken hold of House Republicans. And this refusal to learn from the past makes it very difficult to find a bipartisan path forward on necessary and important legislation to protect the American people as we going forward.

Over and over again, public health experts have told us that having access to timely data during the pandemic was critical to an effective response.

Access to updated, streamlined, and coordinated data is essential in order for CDC to provide recommendations, guidance, and public health information to the general public in a way that is useful and timely. Better health information means better guidance for the public.

Unfortunately, our Republican colleagues refused to include such a provision in their extreme and partisan PAHPA reauthorization bill. Democrats, on the other hand, are committed to future preparedness and will continue to work toward that goal. We saw what happened during the early days of the pandemic and we should do whatever we can to avoid relearning those horrible lessons.

I certainly hope we can have a productive discussion today with Dr. Cohen about her vision and priorities for CDC.

We understandably spend a lot of time talking about COVID, but there are countless other health issues that CDC is always addressing domestically and globally, such as maternal mortality and morbidity, the opioid epidemic, mental health, rates of sexually transmitted infections, and shortages in our health care workforce. All of this work depends on good data and a sound public health infrastructure that enables effective communication between CDC and local governments across the country. We must be able to spot threats early and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions so that Americans can receive the guidance and the assistance they deserve.

Congress also needs to ensure that CDC has adequate resources to do its important work. You only need to look at House Republicans' extreme appropriations bills to see they are not serious about strengthening our public health system. House Republicans want to cut \$1.6 billion from CDC's current funding level. This drastic funding cut would seriously undermine CDC's ability to perform its vital mission and would endanger public health and safety. It once again shows how House Republicans continue to cave to the extreme elements in their party who have no interest in governing.

It's time for Congress to be a partner – not an impediment - to making important and necessary reforms that make our nation safer.

Thank you, I yield back.