"Federal Pandemic Spending: A Prescription for Waste, Fraud, and Abuse"
Committee on Oversight and Accountability
Wednesday, February 1, 2023
Rep. Gerald E. Connolly (VA-11)

It is sad, but predictable Rep. Comer decided to waste his very first hearing from his new perch as Chairman of the Oversight Committee by pointing a finger at Democrats and accusing us of singlehandedly wasting hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars. Let's look at the facts. Federal pandemic spending is a prescription for historically low unemployment, a boosted economy that supercharged a besieged American economy, and strong GDP growth that effectively reversed the worst drop in economic output in American history. Today, that fiscal catalyst continues to pay dividends and provides our country with a soft runway as we slow down the effects of inflation. The COVID relief programs rescued countless jobs, saved an innumerable number of businesses, and prevented the world's most powerful economy from going off a cliff. As of January 2023, nationwide the Paycheck Protection Program saved an estimated 89.9 million jobs and awarded over 11.4 million loans, the Restaurant Revitalization Fund provided a lifeline to 100,600 restaurants, and the Shuttered Venue Operators Grant supported workers at 12,881 different venues.

In fact, the emergency relief programs created by COVID assistance legislation were so popular and necessary, that many Republican Members of Congress secured for themselves millions of dollars in grants. I would like to insert the following Forbes article into the record:

- Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene had $183,504 in PPP loans forgiven.
- Congressman Matt Gaetz had $482,321 in PPP loans forgiven.
- Congressman Mike Kelly had $987,237 in PPP loans forgiven.
- Congressman Kevin Hern had over $1 million in PPP loans forgiven.
- Congressman Markwayne Mullin had over $1.4 million in PPP loans forgiven.
- Congressman Vern Buchanan had over $2.3 million in PPP loans forgiven.

Now that we have addressed this rank hypocrisy, we can turn to the real issues that impeded the deliverance of direct payments to families, localities, and school systems intended to help get kids back to school safely, buoy small businesses, and cut childhood poverty in half.

In a juxtaposition to current leadership, Democrats made sure to use the gavel on the Subcommittee on Government Operations to protect the families, schools, businesses, and local governments attempting to emerge from the carnage of the pandemic. Last Congress, the 11th District in Virginia received $1,158,982,249 in total pandemic program funding. Schools received $478,750,259 to support a wide range of activities, including cleaning and sanitizing schools, purchasing educational technology, training educators to use online learning tools, ensuring access to education for students with disabilities, and providing students emergency funding for food and housing. State, local, and tribal governments received $680,231,990 to help them navigate the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak and bring jobs back. In total, Fairfax County received 38,000 Paycheck Protection Program loans, totaling $3.9 billion and most importantly saving 355,000 jobs. Throughout this entire process, local officials and I met regularly to guarantee all residents feel, see, and experience these investments.

When administering federal assistance programs, there is always room for improvement and oversight. Last Congress, my Government Operations Subcommittee held a hearing and produced legislation focused on addressing fraud and government improper payments. In short, an improper payment is "any payment that should not have been made or that was made in an incorrect amount, including an overpayment or underpayment, under a statutory, contractual, administrative, or other legally applicable requirement." During the hearing, we learned the government must leverage data and proactively invest in information technology solutions to identify the root cause of improper payments and stop them before they happen.

In addition, we eradicated the myth that preventing fraud and designing accessible, intuitive, and equitable services are at odds with each other. When done right, governments can deploy modern technologies that prevent fraud and improve the customer experience—designing more elegant and simple platforms by which families and businesses can apply for and access the services they need. This Congress, I am reintroducing the STOP Fraud Act, which would direct the government to proactively use data analytics to fight fraud and reap the benefits of past lessons learned. The bill will specifically focus on quashing identity theft, holding agencies accountable to meeting established metrics to prevent and reduce fraud, and practicing methodologies to streamline fraud assessments.

Government programs can combat waste, fraud, and abuse while they save and improve lives. This is the dual mandate we should pursue on this Committee, not cynical attempts to label lifesaving COVID relief programs as dismal failures, facts and reality be damned.