

Opening Statement
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Oversight of the Trump Administration’s Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic”
June 23, 2020

Today, the Energy and Commerce Committee continues its important work overseeing the Administration’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is difficult to overstate this disease’s devastating impact. To date, more than 2.2 million Americans have contracted COVID-19, and tragically 120,000 have died. At the same time, more than 45 million Americans have filed for unemployment over the last three months. COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on the country’s physical, mental, and economic wellbeing.

And the pandemic has been especially brutal to people of color and low-income communities. Thousands of families can tell stories of losing a relative without being allowed to visit them in their final days, or the social isolation felt by seniors and others in long-term care facilities. Millions more could tell us about losing their job or being forced to close a small business.

On top of the raw devastation of this disease, this Committee must confront the fact that had it not been for a sluggish initial response from the Trump Administration, and a President putting political considerations over public health, we could have done much more to mitigate the destructive impact of COVID-19. We must learn from and correct the Administration’s mistakes so that we are prepared to combat this disease as more outbreaks flare up this summer and a potential second wave comes in the fall.

Testing has been a problem since the beginning, and while it’s improved, we are still falling far short of the 900,000 daily tests public health experts believe we need. We are also hampered by the Administration’s refusal to develop and implement a national testing and contact tracing strategy. This cannot continue — we need federal public health experts to take more of a leadership role, and this Administration is failing to allow that.

Public health must also be our first consideration as we accelerate research into a vaccine and treatments for COVID-19. We all want a vaccine to be developed as soon as possible, but before any vaccine or treatment is distributed, our public health experts must ensure that it is safe, effective, and accessible. We must also take action to prepare our supply chain with sufficient quantities of vials, needles, syringes, and other products necessary to administer a vaccine.

We also need to improve testing supplies and our supply of personal protective equipment, or PPE, for our frontline workers and others throughout the economy. While our supply of some PPE has improved, governors have told us that we are still far from where we need to be.

Fortunately, last month the House passed the Heroes Act, which provides our public health agencies with the mandate and the resources to ensure we are prepared going forward. The bill requires that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) finally develop a national testing and contact tracing plan and provides \$75 billion to carry it out. It provides billions more to strengthen the Strategic National Stockpile and to increase research, development, and manufacturing of vaccines and treatments. And it ensures that all Americans will be able to receive free coverage of treatments, drugs and an eventual vaccine with no cost-sharing. This legislation is needed today, but the Senate has failed to act, and the Administration has threatened to veto it without putting forward any policy vision of their own.

President Trump refuses to even acknowledge the challenge we face and the difficult work that must be done to prevent further destruction. Just this weekend, as outbreaks flared up and public health leaders continued to urge social distancing, the President put Americans at risk by holding a political rally in Oklahoma. At the rally he suggested that his staff slow down testing to mask the true level of infection across the country. This was an extremely reckless action, and unfortunately it continues the President's pattern of ignoring the advice of his own public health experts. It also sends a horrible message to some Americans that they too can ignore public health experts.

As this vicious disease continues to harm our country, it's also extremely dangerous that the President, the Vice President, and others in this Administration continue to downplay the risks we continue to face today. All around the country warning bells are going off, with hospitals struggling to keep up with the rate of hospitalizations and ICU beds filling up in emerging COVID hotspots. The Administration's unwillingness to face these hard truths I think will lead to more deaths and more needless suffering.

I am pleased we have our nation's public health officials with us today who can help us answer questions about what has gone wrong, what is improving, and how we can be prepared going forward. I look forward to their testimony and I now recognize the Ranking Member for five minutes for his opening statement.