

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Ranking Member Brett Guthrie

Confronting a Growing Public Health Threat: Measles Outbreaks in the U.S.

February 27, 2019

Thank you, Chair DeGette, for holding this important and timely hearing. This is an area of bipartisan interest.

Measles is an extremely contagious virus. It can cause significant respiratory symptoms, fever, and rash. In some cases, the consequences can be severe. One in 20 children with measles develops pneumonia, and one in 1,000 children develop brain swelling that can cause brain damage. One or two in 1,000 children who contract measles will die.

Fortunately, measles was declared eliminated in the United States in 2000 because the nation had gone more than 12 months without any continuous disease transmission. Public health experts believe this progress was achieved because of a very safe combination measles, mumps, rubella – or MMR – vaccine, very high vaccination rates, and a strong public health system to detect and respond to outbreaks.

However, elimination does not mean the disease was completely eradicated. The disease remains in many parts of the world. There are about 20 million cases worldwide each year. Measles returns to the U.S. when infected travelers bring the disease back to parts of the country where some parents have chosen not to vaccinate their children. Because measles is so contagious, it is estimated 93 to 95 percent of people in a locality need to be vaccinated to achieve population immunity. This level of population immunity—provided by very high vaccination rates—prevents outbreaks and sustained transmission of measles. According to CDC tracking, while national vaccination rates remain high, estimated MMR vaccination coverage among 13-to-17-year-old teenagers, can vary widely, ranging from 77.8 percent to 97.9 percent across states and local counties in the United States.

We currently have multiple measles outbreaks in the United States. As of February 21, 2019, the CDC reported that there are 159 confirmed cases of measles this year in 10 states. My home state of Kentucky was recently added to this list.

Unfortunately, this current outbreak is continuing a recent trend. An average of 63 measles cases were reported to CDC from 2000 to 2007. However, from 2011 to 2017, the annual average of reported cases increased to 217. The CDC told the Committee staff that in the last five years there have been 26 measles outbreaks involving five or more people. Seventy-five percent of those cases spread in local close-knit communities with groups of unvaccinated people. These outbreaks are tragic since they are completely avoidable.

Every state, except three, have enacted religious exemptions for parents who wish not to vaccinate their children. There are 17 states that allow a personal or philosophical exemption, which means that most people can opt out for any reason. For example, in Washington State, just 0.3 percent of Washington's families with kindergartners used a religious exemption, while 3.7 percent of families used a personal exemption and 0.8 percent used a medical exemption. Vaccine exemptions have increased in the past three years to a median 2.2 percent of kindergartners among all states.

With recent outbreaks linked to pockets of under-vaccination, some state legislatures are looking to tighten or eliminate certain types of exemptions that allow parents to not have their children immunized. After the Disneyland-linked outbreak of measles in 2014, the state of California ended religious and personal exemptions for vaccines. The Washington legislature is working on legislation that substantially narrows the exemptions for vaccination that would eliminate the personal or philosophical exemption while tightening the religious exemption. In recent weeks, state legislators in New Jersey, New York, Iowa, Maine, and Vermont have proposed eliminating religious exemptions for vaccines. However, last week, the Arizona House Health and Human Services Committee approved three bills to expand exemptions for mandatory vaccinations.

Given the concerns raised by the measles outbreak in various parts of the nation and recent state legislative activity, it is appropriate to have this hearing to provide greater discussion and examination at a national level.

I welcome our two expert witnesses, Dr. Nancy Messonnier of the CDC, and Dr. Anthony Fauci of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. I look forward to your testimony, and I yield back.