

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

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

February 27, 2019

This committee has a long history of addressing public health concerns and infectious disease crises. Today, we are here to discuss the troubling increase in the number of measles cases here in the United States.

This issue hits close to home for me. Just this past December, 33 cases of measles were confirmed in Ocean and Passaic counties of my home state of New Jersey.

Fortunately, the outbreak in New Jersey is now over, but as of this morning, there have been 159 measles cases reported across the nation already this year. And there are now six outbreaks—of three or more cases—in four states. Not only are we seeing a troubling increase in cases, but the number of outbreaks also continues to grow. This is all deeply disturbing.

The reemergence of this highly contagious vaccine-preventable disease poses a threat beyond the pockets of communities in which it arises.

It is particularly dangerous to infants, children under the age of five, those who are pregnant, and people with compromised immune systems. All of these people are at higher risk of severe complications from the measles.

What is particularly disconcerting, is that this is a public health problem for which science has already provided a solution: a safe and effective vaccine. There is overwhelming confidence among researchers, public health officials, and parents in the MMR vaccine.

Yet vaccine hesitancy, and, to a lesser degree, vaccine access concerns are behind the growing number of measles cases in the U.S. since 2010.

I know that we will discuss both of these issues and hear from our experts as to the federal government's responsibility in addressing both.

I'd also like to hear from our witnesses about one particular area of great concern to me, and that is the proliferation of disinformation about the safety and efficacy of the MMR vaccine.

I am deeply troubled by the role digital media plays in perpetuating myths and fears regarding measles. It is undermining the facts on how to safely and effectively prevent measles and other vaccine-preventable diseases.

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For example, recent media reports found that users on YouTube and Facebook are steered toward anti-vaccination content due to the platform's algorithms.

Both companies have said they are taking steps to address the promotion of conspiracy theories, but we must keep our eye on where the misinformation will pop up next.

Particularly when we know there is a preponderance of evidence that the MMR vaccine is safe and effective. And, that there are measures in place to continue to monitor and assess its safety and the safety of other vaccines.

I am deeply troubled that parents are being inundated with distortions and misinformation campaigns when they are going online to try to make informed decisions about their child's health.

I look forward to hearing from Dr. Messonnier and Dr. Fauci about what's driving the recent measles outbreaks. I'd also like to know what efforts are underway by the CDC and NIH to address this growing public health threat, and where they still need additional support.

Thank you, and I yield back.