

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Ranking Member Greg Walden

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

February 27, 2019

Chair DeGette, thank you for holding this hearing. The re-emergence of vaccine-preventable diseases, including measles, coinciding with under-vaccination is a major public health concern. The World Health Organization last month called “vaccine hesitancy” one of the 10 biggest threats to global health, noting the shocking 30 percent increase in measles cases worldwide last year. In 2000, measles was considered to have been eliminated in the United States. But last year, the U.S. had its second-most cases since 2000.

The current measles outbreak showcases the problem of under-vaccination.

It’s a problem that hits close to home for me since 65 measles cases in this outbreak have mainly occurred in Clark County, Washington (a suburb of Portland, Oregon), with four in Multnomah County, Oregon, for a total of 69 confirmed cases of measles. The measles exposure even reached my district, with an infected person from Clark County visiting a trampoline park in Bend, Oregon. Though there have been no confirmed cases resulting from that particular exposure, this highlights the reach of the measles outbreak.

Unfortunately, the case information suggests the region near Portland has been an area of under-vaccination. Most of these cases involved people who were not vaccinated, and most of those infected were children between the ages of one and 10.

County public health officials are confronted with directing hundreds of susceptible families who have been exposed to the virus at more than three dozen locations, including a Portland Trailblazers basketball game, schools, churches, and stores such as Costco and Walmart.

There are important reasons for getting the measles vaccine. Measles is a highly contagious, infectious disease that spreads through coughing and sneezing. Health officials say the virus is so contagious that if an unvaccinated person walks through a room after someone with measles has left, there is a 90 percent chance that an unvaccinated person will get the disease. This can be a very serious disease. Measles infection typically causes a high fever and rash, and about one of four people who gets measles will be hospitalized. The infection can lead to ear infections, hearing loss, and in rarer cases, brain swelling and death.

The measles vaccine is highly effective, and maybe one of the most effective vaccines around. Two doses are about 97 percent effective. Since the introduction of the combination MMR vaccine, there has been a 99 percent reduction in the number of measles cases, compared

to the pre-vaccine era. It not only protects you, but others as well, particularly vulnerable infants who cannot be vaccinated.

This hearing can help provide important information to address questions for some people about the safety of the vaccine, as well heighten awareness about the effectiveness of the vaccine and the importance of getting vaccinated. If we don't reverse the downward trend of vaccination, we risk bringing back measles in full force.

I welcome both of our witnesses to provide their expertise about the disease of measles, and insights into the facts and value of the measles vaccine. Dr. Nancy Messonnier, thank you for your service and your leadership in various senior positions at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Dr. Anthony Fauci, the Director of the National Institutes of Health Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, you need no introduction, having testified probably hundreds of times before this Committee. However, on this occasion I think you should be recognized, sir, for your more than 50 years of public service, including your 35th anniversary year as Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and your achievements. You have made substantial contributions to HIV/AIDS research, and you have developed therapies for formerly fatal diseases. Among many honors, you have been awarded the Lasker Award, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Chair DeGette, I think he deserves a bipartisan round of applause and our appreciation.

We look forward to your testimony, and to learning how our Committee can help support your efforts to protect public health.