

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigations Chair Diana DeGette

Flu Season: U.S. Public Health Preparedness and Response

December 4, 2019

We are here this morning to discuss the topic of our nation's preparedness for this year's flu season.

Ensuring our public health agencies have the tools they need to prepare and respond to seasonal and pandemic flu has, and should remain, a bipartisan effort. That's why this is the 11th hearing this Committee has held related to influenza over the past 15 years.

Today, we continue the Committee's long history in addressing this critical public health issue.

With the 2019–2020 flu season well underway, I thought it necessary to hold this hearing earlier than we have in past years.

According to the CDC, a majority of states are already seeing increasing flu activity. And, history has shown us that we are likely still weeks away from the first peak of the season that often occurs December through February.

Today, we are going to hear from the nation's leading health experts about how people can better protect themselves and their children from this illness before peak flu season.

We will also hear more about the forecast for this season, as well as the efforts that are underway across the federal government to respond as flu activity increases.

We know from past flu seasons that our nation's preparation and response efforts are critical.

During the particularly severe 2017–2018 flu season, for instance, as many as 80,000 people died as a result of the flu. So many people became sick that some hospitals were forced to pitch tents in parking lots to treat those who had become ill.

The more recent 2018–2019 flu season was the longest in a decade. And, while it is still too early to know exactly how severe this year's flu season will be, given the unpredictability and serious danger we face, the fact that our nation's flu vaccination rates continue to be well below our national targets of 70 to 90 percent is highly alarming.

Last year, for example, only 63 percent of children, and just 45 percent of adults, received a flu vaccine. While those overall rates continue to be disappointing, the fact that they are five and eight points higher, respectively, compared to the year before – they are, at least, moving in the right direction.

But we still have much more work to do to protect the public's health.

I am hoping that our witnesses today can provide us an update on the efforts underway to further strengthen vaccine confidence and improve these annual vaccination rates.

I also look forward to updates from our witnesses about the effectiveness of the flu vaccine, as well as what research is underway to improve its efficacy.

While last year's vaccine was up to 44 percent effective against the H1N1 flu strain, which was the initial flu strain that was circulating, it was only nine percent effective for the H3N2 strain, which became the dominant strain at the end of season.

As I am sure our witnesses will remind us, even a vaccine with low effectiveness is still able to protect millions of people from getting sick and help reduce the severity of symptoms for those who do. And that's why the flu vaccine remains the best tool we have to protect the public's health during these threatening times.

But, as I have said numerous times before, we can and must do more to improve our vaccines effectiveness.

The NIH recently began conducting the first in-human trials for a universal flu vaccine, and the National Influenza Vaccine Task Force was recently established.

While these are certainly promising, the importance of a strong public health infrastructure necessary to prepare for, and respond to, seasonal flu cannot be overstated.

I have confidence that our federal, state, and local public health experts have put us in a strong position to respond this year's flu season, but there is always more work to be done—and there are always things we can improve. I am looking forward to hearing from our experts today on what they believe we still need to do to make our national preparedness even stronger than it currently is.

I'm thankful that we have such a distinguished panel of experts across federal agencies here before us today. The nation is fortunate to have your talent on the frontlines in the ongoing fight against influenza and other infectious diseases.

It's our job to ensure that you have the tools and resources you need to remain on the cutting edge of science, and I hope today you can tell us what you need going forward.