

Opening Statement
Chair Diana DeGette
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing “On the Front Line: How Governors are Battling the COVID-19 Pandemic”
June 2, 2020

Today, the Energy and Commerce Committee is holding its first virtual hearing. As the oldest standing committee in the House of Representatives, this is an historic occasion for the Congress and this Committee, and this unusual setting is a testament to unprecedented times. Nevertheless, the responsibilities of this Subcommittee continue, most importantly, with oversight of our country’s response to COVID-19.

We have come a long way in our fight against COVID-19, but we must not get complacent. New cases and deaths are still rising in some states, and public health experts warn of a second wave if we relax social distancing measures without sufficient safeguards, such as contact tracing and testing.

Committee leaders have repeatedly emphasized that widespread testing is key to both monitoring the spread of coronavirus, and enabling states and communities to safely reopen. But six months into this crisis, there is still not enough testing being done.

The Trump Administration has a long record of broken promises when it comes to testing.

Back in the first week of March, Vice President Pence estimated that 1.5 million tests would be available by the end of the week, but a week later only 4,000 tests had been conducted across the country, according to the COVID Tracking Project.

We all remember President Trump visited the CDC on March 6th and declared [quote], “Anybody that needs a test can have a test. They’re all set; they have them out there.” Those infamous words were simply a lie, with states and doctors across the country pleading for more tests.

Then on March 15th, HHS said that 1.9 million tests would be available in the next week, calling it a [quote] “game changer.” A week later, just over 250,000 tests had been conducted in total – far short of the 1.9 million that had been promised.

And on March 19th, FDA told Committee staff that over 27 million tests would be available by March 28th. That was clearly an absurd promise, because even today, in a country with over 329 million people, only about 17 million tests have been conducted.

And still, the Trump Administration keeps over-promising. As recently as May 11th, President Trump said [quote] “if people want to get tested, they get tested.”

When it comes to testing, this Administration has told lie after lie. President Trump's strategy for testing has been to bury his head in the sand and hope this pandemic miraculously disappears.

If we are going to give the American public confidence that they can resume familiar activities and safely return to work, we need to greatly expand testing to more people, including asymptomatic people.

Some public health experts estimate that the U.S. needs to be testing at least twice as many people as it is right now – up to 7 million per week. That will require more engagement by the Administration, which so far has not risen to the occasion.

This fall will present an entirely new challenge for us. Nearly every state is already in the process of reopening – and without a vaccine, we will face a possible second wave of coronavirus infections, just as we enter influenza season. So now is the time to get it right.

The Administration is promising 40 to 50 million tests per month by September. I would like to give them the benefit of the doubt, but with their track record, this Administration simply has no credibility.

Let's be clear. The states and governors on the front lines of this crisis are working around-the-clock, doing everything they can to address shortages and help their communities. But there is only so much any governor can do in this global crisis without clear, effective leadership from the federal government.

As more communities reopen this summer, and as we head into the fall, we cannot repeat the chaos we saw this spring with states scrambling for tests and competing with one another for critical supplies.

I am grateful to the witnesses today for taking the time out of their busy schedules as they oversee the COVID-19 responses in their states. Governors Whitmer and Hutchinson, I thank you for bringing us your insight into this issue. And I also thank Governor Polis from my state of Colorado, which has been hard-hit by the coronavirus – especially in Denver.

While 20 to 50 year olds represent the majority of cases here in Colorado, it is the elderly who are suffering the most severe effects, including fatality. And, like many other states, communities of color in Colorado have been disproportionately impacted by this disease.

Each of these governors has a monumental task before them, and it is important for the Committee to hear from them about what challenges they face, and what more they need from Congress and the Trump Administration.

We have come a long way – and I look forward to hearing from the witnesses about progress made in their states, and how we might replicate that success elsewhere.

But these states cannot do it on their own. This is a national emergency, and only a coordinated national effort will allow us to emerge from this crisis.

I yield back.