

Opening Statement of Republican Leader Greg Walden
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
“On the Front Lines: How Governors are Battling the COVID-19 Pandemic”
June 2, 2020

As Prepared for Delivery

Chair DeGette, I was pleasantly surprised to see accommodations were made so that those members who are here in Washington, D.C. could meet in the hearing room. In approving virtual hearings, the Rules Committee recommended that House committees make such accommodations.

The Health Subcommittee proved we could safely conduct our business with a hearing two weeks ago.

Several committees have held either in-person or hybrid-style hearings in the Capitol office buildings in recent weeks. Many of the members of this subcommittee are here in Washington today. This hearing could have easily followed suit.

I urge my friend, Chairman Pallone, to continue to accommodate the in-person participation of Members going forward.

Meanwhile, I want to welcome the governors. With all the challenges we are facing as a nation, from the pandemic we are discussing today, to the unrest in the

wake of the tragic death of George Floyd, we deeply appreciate your making time to be with us today.

States are indeed what Justice Brandeis called “laboratories of democracy,” testing different policies for their individual circumstances. I look forward to learning about their successes in responding to the pandemic, the remaining challenges, and how the state and federal partnership can be strengthened to ensure these challenges can be successfully addressed.

There is no question, facing a once-in-a-century global pandemic, the federal, state, and local health systems encountered some difficulties in ramping up diagnostic testing and working out the logistical details of complex, global supply chains. However, it is only fair to now acknowledge the tremendous progress that has been achieved over the last few weeks. The efforts by the White House and federal agencies to get full visibility into various supply chains in a very short period of time, and then obtaining necessary supplies for the nation’s testing and other needs while competing for them with the rest of the world, has been nothing short of remarkable, while federal officials such as Dr. Brett Giroir and Admiral John Polowczyk, have been candid, clear-eyed, and open about the enormity of standing up a testing structure in the middle of a pandemic emergency.

Nearly every state is now in a better position to test anybody they have determined to be a high priority. Congress stepped up to the plate in the CARES Act and other stimulus packages with billions in funding for states to use for more testing and contact tracing.

These actions are getting results. Since the beginning of this pandemic, many experts have argued that the U.S. needs to reach a level of conducting 500,000 COVID-19 tests a day. In May, the U.S. achieved more than 400,000 tests a day, several times. With vastly more rapid point-of-care testing, at-home and saliva-based testing, and antigen testing are expected to be rolled out in the coming weeks, this benchmark is expected to rapidly increase.

There is also no question that some states have responded to this pandemic better than others, both in focusing resources to address the public health crisis and positioning their states to responsibly reopen. For example, Arkansas has already met the federally recommended goal of testing 2 percent of its population in a month for May and aims to reach 3 to 4 percent of its population monthly after June.

The HHS strategic testing plan projects that by September that the U.S. may be able to conduct up to 50 million tests per month, or more than 1.6 million tests per day. At more than 1.6 million tests a day, the U.S. would not only easily exceed the goal of 500,000 tests a day but would also surpass the Harvard Global Health Institute's recommendation of 900,000 tests per day to contain the outbreak.

The HHS strategic plan on testing shows a serious and honest effort. It outlines a pathway toward providing more resources and more assistance to states for more and better testing in order to manage risks and allow our economy to safely reopen.

I thank of all of our distinguished witnesses for appearing today. I especially express my appreciation to Governor Asa Hutchinson, who on very short notice, agreed to work us into his schedule.