

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Ranking Member Kathy Castor

Hearing on “The Federal Response to COVID-19”

February 8, 2023

Thank you, Mr., Chairman, and thank you all for being here today. Thank you to our witnesses, thank you for all that you do to help keep Americans healthy, safe and well. I am sorry that Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response, Dawn O’Connell, cannot be with us today to share her expertise. I want to express my sympathies for the sudden death in her family and her loss. I appreciate, though, that she did submit testimony and has agreed to respond to written questions.

All Americans are relieved that we are emerging from the worst pandemic in our lifetimes. Over one million American lives lost. Examining the response to Covid-19 will help us prepare for the next health emergency. If we take ourselves back to those early days in the pandemic, I remember very well the public was scared, they were uncertain. But public health experts in government across the country mobilized to better understand the virus, to develop vaccines and treatments, and try to provide us the answers in the face of great uncertainty. They worked to follow the science and improve guidance as we learned new information about the virus and how to contain it. And they were trying their hardest to save lives in the face of a new threat.

The tone from the top, however, was very different. In the earliest, most critical days of the COVID-19 pandemic, then-President Trump downplayed the threat, saying that it was “one person coming in from China, and we have it under control” and “it’s going to go away.” He improvised from the White House briefing room about potential treatments completely unsupported by science, and sometimes dangerous—hydroxychloroquine, bleach, and ultraviolet light. He repeatedly undercut the hard work of public health officials who were up against one of the greatest threats to our country in modern times. Despite this, the Republican Majority now somehow claims that the Biden administration is to blame for reduced confidence in public health institutions.

Over the past two years, Republicans have repeatedly chosen to cast blame on the Biden administration and career public servants to deflect from their leader’s early failures to contain the pandemic, and some have actively spread misinformation, and tried to hide vital public health data.

At last week’s hearing, I stated that I was hopeful we could avoid in this Committee the kind of partisan attacks on public servants that we have seen taking root in other committees across the House, and instead focus constructively on how to strengthen our public health infrastructure for the future. Unfortunately, just one day after last week’s hearing, this Committee sent a letter to NIH requesting a huge number of documents and transcribed

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interviews of career staff while implying that the agency is hiding information about the origins of COVID-19.

Democrats, however, remain focused on how to restore and maintain trust in the world's top health institutions represented here today, give them the tools and resources they need to keep Americans safe, and ensure that the public has the best information based on solid science to make decisions.

Combating this virus is an enormous challenge. It continues to mutate and our response and strategies must evolve with it. But what will remain constant is my firm support for strong public health institutions, which have saved countless lives.

I am immensely grateful for the witnesses' leadership. I look forward to hearing how you plan on incorporating lessons learned from COVID-19 to further strengthen your agencies for in these important missions in the future.