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**Chair of Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations**  
**Joint Oversight & Investigations and Health Subcommittee Hearing**  
**February 8, 2023**  
**Opening Statement**  
**As Prepared for Delivery**

Good morning and welcome to this joint Oversight and Investigations and Health Subcommittee Hearing examining the federal response to COVID-19. Before we start, I want to extend my condolences to Assistant Secretary O’Connell of ASPR, who was planning to testify today, and to her family on the passing of her sister.

To date, more than 1 million Americans have died from COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> On top of the loss of life, the pandemic brought our country to a standstill. It cost our economy around \$15 trillion dollars.<sup>2</sup> That equates to more than 200,000 small businesses permanently closed due to the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#datatracker-home>

<sup>2</sup> Richard Bruns & Nikki Teran, *Weighing the Cost of the Pandemic*, Institute for Progress (Apr. 21, 2022), <https://progress.institute/weighing-the-cost-of-the-pandemic/>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19s-toll-on-u-s-business-200-000-extra-closures-in-pandemics-first-year-11618580619>

Schools were closed for far too long, setting children behind in learning and damaging their social, emotional, and, in many cases, physical well-being.

The nation is still recovering from the pandemic's impact and the damage it caused. Given these losses, it is appalling that the last time we had the heads of the public health agencies before us was March of 2021—almost two years ago.

We held a hearing last week with the Governmental Accountability Office and other experts in the field of pandemic and biological outbreaks where we discussed how being able to quickly identify the root cause of a disease outbreak or biological incident is crucial for a list of reasons ranging from countermeasure development to identifying what activities may have been responsible for incident.

While the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic is likely behind us, there are a host of areas that we need to examine, including the past

actions taken—and not taken—by the federal government, as well as how we address future pandemic preparedness.

By all accounts, the risk of catastrophic biological incidents and infectious disease pandemics is increasing, so it is critical that we understand in detail the federal response.

Since the heads of these agencies have not appeared before us in quite some time, we have a lot of questions about the federal government's response to COVID-19.

Further, many of these questions we have are due to the lack of response to Congressional inquiries regarding COVID-19. We received responses by some federal agencies but many of our questions and letters went completely unanswered as we waited for information that would help us to better prepare our country for future pandemics.

One of the major concerns that has gone unanswered by the National Institute of Health is the lack of compliance and oversight into grant awards to EcoHealth Alliance.

There are a myriad of compliance issues surrounding EcoHealth and their subaward grants to the Wuhan Institute of Virology, specifically for coronavirus research.

The NIH has been reluctant to answer our inquiries on issues such as EcoHealth withholding data, potentially double billing the federal government, and missing laboratory notebooks and electronic files that were supposed to be delivered to NIH by EcoHealth.

It does not have to be this confrontational, Republican leaders have sent a similar letter to entities such as Boston University about an experiment involving a hybrid COVID virus that attracted press attention. Boston University fully cooperated, sending a written response letter directly addressing the questions, producing about 2,000 pages of documents, and providing a briefing to bipartisan staff.

In contrast, NIH has not provided a satisfactory or complete response. This is not acceptable. Let me make this clear, it is not

acceptable to stonewall any Member of Congress with oversight authority. Whether Democrat or Republican, whether Minority or Majority. Unless you respond with a rational, valid national security concern.

Another one of the many issues that we hope to address today is the CDC and their rationale for masking and the closure and reopening of schools.

We now have the findings of a comprehensive review of multiple randomized controlled trials that show “no clear reduction in respiratory viral infection with the use of medical/surgical masks” or with the use of N95s.

The conclusion of these studies makes me wonder what evidence there ever was justifying forced masking of children or mask mandates for interstate travel.

Looking forward, the members of my subcommittee also have questions about pathogen researched being funded and conducted by federal agencies. In the United States, we have recently seen high-risk

research done to intentionally modify pathogens, such as NIH's experiments to enhance monkeypox's virulence.

As a final note, I hope that our witnesses are more forthcoming and cooperative going forward.

At the end of day, we need to work together. The Committee's majority is willing work with you and our Democrat colleagues constructively to deliver solutions and pave a path forward for America.

We want to work in common purpose for the national good, but we must be partners, you and your agencies must be transparent, responsive, and cooperative for us to be able to work together.

I thank the witnesses for being here today and being part of this important discussion.