



MEMORANDUM

To: Members and Staff, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

From: Majority Committee Staff

Re: Hearing on “Unmasking Challenges CDC Faces in Rebuilding Public Trust Amid Respiratory Illness Season.”

On Thursday, November 30, 2023, at 10:00 a.m. (ET) in 2322 Rayburn House Office Building, the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations will hold a hearing entitled, “Unmasking Challenges CDC Faces in Rebuilding Public Trust Amid Respiratory Illness Season.”

I. WITNESS

Dr. Mandy Cohen, Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

II. OVERVIEW

With winter approaching comes the return of respiratory disease season with its anticipated increased spread of influenza, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), and COVID-19. This year, it comes as a critical test for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as the CDC seeks to build back public trust following well-documented mistakes during the COVID-19 pandemic and while the agency is still engaged in its “Moving Forward” reform effort. The Committee seeks to explore and better understand CDC’s planned response and outlook for the 2023 respiratory disease season, and how this and other recent experiences will inform any plans or changes moving forward.

III. BACKGROUND

The CDC is a federal health agency under the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) whose primary mission is to defend the nation against various health, safety, and security threats, whether they originate domestically or abroad.¹

With a workforce of over 21,000 full-time employees and contractors spread across all 50 states and in more than 50 countries, the CDC operates not only from its main headquarters in Atlanta but also from ten other locations within the U.S.² In Fiscal Year 2023, the CDC was

¹ CDC, About CDC: Organization, <https://www.cdc.gov/about/organization/cio.htm>.

² *What is the CDC and What Does It Do?*, Atlanta Journal-Constitution (Feb. 26, 2020), <https://www.ajc.com/news/national/what-the-cdc-and-what-does/UIBH7SvtNyY0fk5iNc6BLO/>.

allocated over \$9 billion for its principal public health programs, marking a significant increase of \$787 million (9.3%) from the previous fiscal year's budget.³

Despite substantial resources and the importance of its role in supporting our nation's public health, the CDC has faced criticism for its handling of public health emergencies, notably the COVID-19 pandemic. These recent failures are not isolated occurrences but a reflection of deeper, longstanding challenges within the organization.

This hearing provides an opportunity for the Subcommittee to evaluate the agency's readiness and preparedness plans for the current respiratory disease season, as well as future public health crises. The hearing will also examine the effectiveness of the CDC's recent reorganization efforts, which aim to improve the agency's operational, communication, workforce, and response capabilities.

Fall Respiratory Disease Season: Overview, Challenges, and Response Strategies

The respiratory disease season poses unique challenges to the health care system, as respiratory viruses share common modes of transmission and similar symptoms, complicating diagnoses and treatment efforts.⁴ The CDC plays a critical role in monitoring the spread of respiratory diseases, providing guidelines for prevention and treatment, and coordinating national response efforts.

The 2023 respiratory disease season is expected to be particularly challenging due to the concurrent circulation of three viruses: flu, RSV, and COVID-19.⁵ Each of these viruses are unique, affect different population segments with varying levels of severity, and have distinct impacts on our overarching public health system. This hearing will provide an opportunity to hear from the CDC as to how the agency is leveraging past experiences to innovate, improve, and craft a multifaceted response strategy.⁶

CDC Reorganization

CDC is also undergoing an internal reorganization in an attempt to fix shortcomings and failures identified during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷ The goal of this reorganization is to create a more agile and responsive approach to public health emergencies. Specific goals of this reorganization include (1) streamlining decision-making processes, (2) enhancing data collection

³ Kavya Sekar, Cong. Research Serv., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Funding Overview (2023), <https://www.crs.gov/Reports/R47207>.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Respiratory Disease Season Outlook," CDC (2023), <https://www.cdc.gov/forecast-outbreak-analytics/about/season-outlook.html>.

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023-2024 Respiratory Disease Season October Update, CDC (2023), <https://www.cdc.gov/respiratory-viruses/whats-new/2023-2024-season-october-update.html>.

⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Seasonal Influenza (Flu) Weekly U.S. Influenza Surveillance Report (updated weekly), CDC, <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/weekly/index.htm>.

⁷ Reuters, U.S. CDC Plans to Focus on Public Health Response After Pandemic Failings, (Aug. 17, 2022), <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/cdc-plans-reorganize-structure-after-pandemic-related-criticism-wsj-2022-08-17/>.

and analysis capabilities, and (3) improving coordination with state and local health departments.⁸ Whether these reforms, which have largely been carried out in secret and without input from Congress, the American people, or even external stakeholders, will be successful remains to be seen.

IV. STAFF CONTACTS

For any questions regarding this hearing, please contact Gavin Proffitt at the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations staff, at (202) 225-3641.

⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "CDC Moving Forward Summary Report," CDC (August 17, 2022), <https://www.cdc.gov/about/organization/cdc-moving-forward-summary-report.html>.