

Committee on Energy and Commerce

**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of**

Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Ranking Member Kathy Castor

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

November 30, 2023

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Welcome, Dr. Cohen and thank you for your service as the newest Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The timing of your appearance is important as we want to ensure that Americans have all necessary information to protect themselves from respiratory disease as we head into the season of higher infections and illness from flu, COVID-19 and RSV.

This subcommittee held a hearing in June on CDC’s plans to improve its effectiveness in performing its core public health missions without inviting anyone from CDC who could provide a substantive update. Thankfully, we can hear directly from Dr. Cohen today about her priorities to help Americans stay healthy.

One of the strengths of the CDC is that it works in collaboration with states and local communities across America. Strong public health partnerships and infrastructure are our best line of defense against disease. Families, communities, businesses, and policymakers like us rely on up-to-date information to understand risks and to devise prevention strategies.

Earlier this week, CDC released data showing that life expectancy in 2022 increased slightly, after a decrease in 2020 and 2021 due to the heavy toll (over 1 million American deaths) caused by COVID-19. The historic emergency legislation passed by Democrats in the last Congress, and the extraordinary efforts of communities and health professionals across the country and the Biden Administration, have allowed us to put the dark days of the COVID-19 pandemic behind us. We can focus anew on ongoing public health threats like heart disease, cancer, opioid addiction, suicide, and gun violence. For a country that is grappling with debts and deficits, and for families looking to lower health care costs, it’s more important than ever that we ensure that all Americans have access to good nutrition and lifesaving vaccines, and don’t start smoking cigarettes.

Unfortunately, nearly four years after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, some of my Republican colleagues continue to aggressively undermine cost-saving prevention work and malign scientists performing life-saving medical research. The Republican majority has actively opposed enacting meaningful policy that would put America in a stronger position to respond to a future health emergency. Republicans want to take us backward through harmful cutbacks, shutdowns and budget showdowns. Meanwhile Democrats are working to put people over

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politics to keep our neighbors healthy and well, prevent unnecessary hospitalizations and deaths, and be ready for the next Ebola, Zika or coronavirus.

You truly never know what is going to happen next. This summer, Sarasota, Florida, experienced a surprising outbreak of malaria—the first locally acquired cases in 20 years! Patients had fever, abdominal pain, vomiting ... some were hospitalized. Thank goodness CDC experts jumped in to aid the local community and hospitals and develop a containment and prevention strategy.

And that's good because malaria is one of the world's greatest public health problems – infecting approximately 219 million people each year, with an estimated 660,000 deaths. I am so grateful for the strong response by CDC, and it's a good example of the importance of sharing timely information with the public. Data-sharing became entirely too political during COVID-19 when some officials in my state concealed and altered information we desperately needed.

Even in the best of circumstances, CDC has a very difficult job. While some politicians are more intent on discrediting CDC or actively spreading misinformation—as former President Trump did repeatedly in 2020 during the height of the coronavirus pandemic and as the governor and surgeon general in my home state of Florida continue to do today—the job gets much harder.

I look forward to hearing from Dr. Cohen today about CDC's efforts to strengthen prevention efforts and keep Americans safe, and how the federal government can help our communities best respond to this respiratory disease season.