

Republican Leader Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Health Subcommittee Hearing
“Booster Shot: Enhancing Public Health through Vaccine Legislation”
June 15, 2021
As Prepared for Delivery

Thank you, Chair Eshoo and Republican Leader Guthrie.

Vaccines are a bright spot in the fight to enable Americans to live long, healthy lives.

The return to normalcy after COVID-19 is just one chapter of that story.

Examples of Vaccines & Impact on Public Health

We know that vaccines save lives.

Thanks to vaccines, four preventable disease are completely eliminated from the Americas today.

Between 2011 and 2020, immunization programs in low-income countries are estimated to have saved more than 23 million lives.

And now, thanks to the Trump Administration and Operation Warp Speed, we have three authorized vaccines in record time to crush COVID-19.

It’s because the private sector leveraged investment and regulatory flexibility provided by Congress and the Trump Administration to unleash innovation.

Think about it.... Today—just over a year since the pandemic began—we are holding a hearing about getting a vaccine to every person who wants one.

At the start of the pandemic, experts were estimating that we may just be getting the first vaccines at this point.

This record speed is a remarkable story of American innovation.

Since December when the first COVID-19 vaccine was authorized, COVID-19 deaths have plummeted...

... And, as more adults get vaccinated, cases are decreasing all over the country.

Operation Warp Speed as brought us back from the brink – back to work, back to school, attending weddings, visiting grandparents, planning vacations – without fear of an unknown virus.

Congress took unprecedented additional steps to make sure every American could get a vaccine for COVID-19 for free.

But we have seen that there are additional barriers to vaccination.

As we return to normalcy, I am glad we are examining existing programs that aim to improve access to all vaccines to make sure that those who want vaccines, can get them, and in the case of childhood vaccines, parents have the best information to make decisions for their family.

Existing Programs to Incentivize Vaccine Innovation & Access

The state and federal governments work together to implement two programs to make sure those who cannot afford recommended vaccines have access.

The “Section 317” vaccine program has been around for more than 50 years, and authorizes the federal purchase of vaccines for children, adolescents, and adults.

Additionally, the Vaccines for Children (VFC) program was established in 1993.

The VFC provides vaccines at no cost to children who are Medicaid eligible, uninsured, underinsured, and American Indian or Alaskan natives.

With the creation of the Vaccines for Children program, the “Section 317” vaccine program focuses on uninsured adults and underinsured children not eligible for VFC.

These programs allow the CDC to purchase vaccines directly from the manufacturer, and then provide the vaccines to states.

As we’ve learned from the pandemic, state and local public health agencies are best situated to tailor programs best for their communities.

I am glad we’re looking at these programs today and hope that any COVID-19 vaccines approved by the FDA will soon be distributed through these traditional channels.

Innovation & Healthy Future Through Vaccines

To win the future, America must lead in the development and discovery of safe and effective vaccines.

I want to make sure that as we debate access to vaccines, we are not disincentivizing the investment and risk necessary to study and bring vaccines to market.

Unlike drugs for when you are sick, vaccines are given to healthy children and adults.

Large studies are necessary to ensure safety and build trust.... given the breadth of the population often taking a vaccine.

The risk-benefit profile is different than say, a cancer drug, where side effects may be more acceptable given the risk of the disease.

More vaccines are desperately needed.

.. for diseases we know about, like HIV and flu.

Just this month, promising reports were released about a universal flu vaccine and potential novel ways to vaccinate against HIV.

We also need to be ready for the next unknown virus, as COVID-19 was unknown to us in 2018.

The federal government needs to continue investing in research and prioritizing vaccine development, while also making sure that incentives exist for private industry to do the same.

Making sure that patients have access to vaccines once they are developed and approved is one important way to promote and unleash innovation, and I look forward to hearing what more we can do.