

Opening Statement for the Honorable Brett Guthrie
Hearing on “The Fiscal Year 2023 Budget”

April 27, 2022

As Prepared for Delivery

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Today, we are discussing the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) proposed fiscal year 2023 budget. Today also marks just the second time that the nation’s top health official has come before this subcommittee when the Biden Administration has extended the public health emergency 5 times.

We should hear more from our leaders of an agency that controls over \$1 trillion. I call on my Democratic colleagues to hold more HHS oversight hearings – it is one of the most important duties we have as Members of Congress and our constituents deserve better. One stark example is the lack of oversight on COVID-19 spending and response. The last time the administration testified on COVID-19 before the committee was in March of 2021, over one year ago.

I know myself and other members of this committee have asked Secretary Becerra to provide a detailed plan for unwinding the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency, particularly how the agency intends on ensuring there are no significant disruptions in care once these blanket waivers expire at the expiration of the Public Health Emergency. We have yet to receive a response.

Oversight is especially important given the huge increases in funding requested by the Biden Administration. The HHS budget before us today calls for a 12 percent increase in discretionary spending at HHS for fiscal year 2023. The budget specifically gives more than a \$6 billion combined boost in funding to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), both of which have come under fire recently over controversial masking guidance and COVID-19 research funded by NIH using American taxpayer dollars. We need to hold NIH accountable and ensure taxpayer dollars are not going to labs engaging in risky gain-of-function research and ensure researchers are transparent about how they are spending taxpayer funded research grants.

The budget even increases spending for climate change initiatives at HHS, and the 174-page budget in brief document mentions climate change more than it does fentanyl.

I am increasingly concerned that HHS has lost its way since President Biden took office and these budget priorities reflect this change in course. HHS has become increasingly more politicized, which we saw with CDC's school reopening and masking guidance, and less transparent with Congress, especially in the context of the use of COVID-19 relief funding that a recent *STAT News* article

outlines. The agency has also taken a punitive, one-size-fits-all approach, to combating COVID-19 through onerous vaccine mandates.

The Biden has also failed the American people by planning to revoke Title 42, which was used to prohibit migrants from entering the United States illegally to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This poor decision comes despite the Biden Administration extending the Public Health Emergency for another 90 days in the same month and without providing a clear plan of action to address what many expect will be a massive influx of migrants trying to enter the United States through our Southern Border.

We have seen an unprecedented levels of fentanyl and fentanyl-related substances entering our country through the Southern Border and killing thousands of Americans. Between 2020 and 2021 fiscal years combined, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol seized over 15,000 pounds of illicit fentanyl at our Southwest Border. This coincided with the highest number of drug overdoses our country has ever experienced with the expected number of overdose deaths reaching 106,000 in the 12-month period ending in November 2021.

We need to secure our own borders and work to permanently schedule fentanyl-related substances to keep these poisons out of our communities. We can also do this while promoting public health programming, like the bill Mr. Tonko

and I partnered on together. This legislation offers individuals seeking help overcoming their addiction with the resources they need to get back on their feet, like workforce services and peer support services.

I finally am concerned that the Department has continued to restrict access to proven medical advances such as the first FDA approved therapy to treat Alzheimer's Disease in almost 20 years. I urge the Biden Administration to swiftly repropose a new coverage policy that allows patients, doctors, and their families to make informed decisions about their treatment.

HHS must get back on track to using its resources for solutions that will drive down health care costs for Americans, keep deadly drugs off our streets, and bring new breakthrough and potentially life-saving cures to patients.

Thank you, and I yield back.