COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY
REPUBLICANS Frank Lucas, Ranking Member

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Frank Lucas

Full Committee Hearing

Fighting Flu, Saving Lives: Vaccine Science and Innovation

November 20, 2019

Good morning Chairwoman Johnson. I would like to thank you and Vice Chairman Bera for holding this hearing, especially given we are in the middle of flu season.

In the United States, nearly a million individuals are hospitalized for the flu every year, including more than 48,000 children. In Oklahoma, since the 2019 flu season began on September 1st, there has been one death and 73 hospitalizations from the flu. However, these numbers would be far worse if we did not have vaccines. Vaccination is, by far, the best flu prevention measure we have today.

It is easy to forget that a little over a hundred years ago the world faced one of the deadliest pandemics in history – the 1918 H1N1 pandemic, also known as the "Spanish flu." It killed an estimated 50 million people worldwide, including roughly 675,000 people in the United States. Medical technology and countermeasures at the time were limited to isolation and quarantine. Influenza vaccines did not exist, and antibiotics had not been fully developed yet.

Thankfully, due to basic research, advancements were made both in treatment and prevention of the flu. The development of vaccines has played an important role in reducing or eliminating deadly disease. I can still recall my father's old stories about how late summer and fall was a terrifying time as a child because of the threat of polio during those seasons. Lucky for me, I did not have to experience living with this fear because the first polio vaccine became available in the United States in 1955.

And thanks to widespread vaccination, polio has been nearly eradicated in the United States, with just 33 cases reported in 2018. However, polio remains a threat in some countries. With the world becoming more connected through modern transportation, it only takes one traveler with polio to bring the disease into the United States. As I'm sure we will hear this morning from our witnesses, the best way to keep the United States polio-free is to maintain high immunity through vaccination.

Considerable advancements have been made in health technology, disease surveillance, medical care, medicines and drugs, vaccines and pandemic planning. While significant progress has been made, gaps remain, and a severe pandemic could still be devastating to the global population.

As the human population has grown, so has the livestock, swine and poultry populations to feed them. This expanded number of hosts provides increased opportunities for unique viruses from birds, cattle, and pigs to spread, evolve and infect people.

As a member of the House Agriculture Committee, I supported the creation of the National Animal Vaccine and Veterinary Countermeasures Bank, which was included in the last Farm Bill. This vaccine bank will maintain sufficient quantities of animal vaccines and other countermeasures to provide a rapid response to an animal disease outbreak. If an outbreak were to occur and we were not prepared, our entire agricultural sector would suffer immense losses, causing long-term harm to the economic viability of U.S. livestock, poultry and swine production – not to mention the damaging effect on human health.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about the current state of our stockpiles of human health vaccines to provide the capacity for rapid response in emergency situations. I particularly look forward to hearing how BARDA's Influenza Vaccine Manufacturing Infrastructure is supporting public-private partnerships with domestic vaccine manufacturers to increase preparedness levels and response capabilities for potential pandemic flu events in the United States.

Lastly, I would just like to say how pleased I was to see the President's recent Executive Order to address modernizing flu vaccines. The Executive Order recognizes influenza as a public health and national security priority with the potential to inflict harm on the United States through large-scale illness and death.

Most importantly, it establishes a national task force to explore alternative vaccine production methods and new technologies – including a plan for accelerating the development of a universal flu vaccine. I look forward to seeing what recommendations come from the task force.

I would again like to thank Chairwoman Johnson and Vice-Chairman Bera for holding this hearing. I would also like to thank both witness panels for taking the time to be here to share your expertise and insights with us this morning.

I yield back the balance of my time.