Opening Statement of Investigations & Oversight Subcommittee Ranking Member Ralph Norman

Subcommittee on Investigations & Oversight Hearing – "Data for Decision-Making: Responsible Management of Data during COVID-19 and Beyond"

September 23rd, 2020

Good Morning and thank you, Chairman Foster. And thank you to the witnesses for your participation today. I hope we can use this hearing as an opportunity not only to identify where data gaps exist, but also to identify potential solutions to help us all better understand the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic and make well-informed decisions moving forward.

Over the past several months, we've seen life as we know it change within the blink of an eye. Cities across the country went into shut down, schools and non-essential businesses were closed, and stay-at-home orders were issued to limit the spread of the virus. We saw our economy come to a halt as millions of Americans lost their jobs and many businesses were forced to permanently shut their doors.

On a daily basis, public health officials, healthcare providers, policymakers, and other local leaders across the country have had to make difficult decisions about the health and safety of their communities. Decision makers should rely on detailed and accurate data to advise and prioritize response efforts. Data issues are not a new public health problem, as data collection, management, and sharing have challenged the public health community since long before the Coronavirus pandemic.

Unfortunately, the Coronavirus pandemic increased the strain on public health infrastructure across the country. Incomplete and at times inaccurate data is being reported to state and local health departments, which is then used to inform critical policy and operational decisions.

The catastrophic impact the Coronavirus has had on long-term care facilities and nursing homes is just one example of how poor data management has led to

detrimental consequences over the past few months. If better data had been available to policymakers, we would have known just how vulnerable the elderly are to this virus, and countless deaths and hospitalizations could have been prevented.

One of the biggest data challenges affecting the Coronavirus pandemic is that we do not know exactly how much of it is out there, and researchers must estimate its prevalence through data-driven disease forecasting and modeling. Predictions on the number of Coronavirus cases, hospitalizations, and deaths help inform public health decision-making by calculating the expected impact of the pandemic in coming weeks or even months.

Outdated public health systems are in desperate need of modernization. Currently, the virus is spreading faster than public health data and response efforts. This has all been allowed due to a lack of integrating public health systems across state and local governments. We must consider how to incorporate new and innovative techniques to improve slow and static decision-making processes amid this pandemic, and this begins with modernizing public health infrastructure.

We cannot afford to make bad policy decisions due to poor data during this pandemic and future public health emergencies. It is important that we understand the gaps and challenges with the data that we have to best inform response efforts.

As policymakers, our decisions must be informed by data. The quality of those decisions is directly affected by the quality of the data we're using. I look forward to hearing more about how we can improve the timeliness, accuracy, and distribution of public health data.

I yield back.