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May 31, 2024

The Honorable Brad Wenstrup
Chair
Select Subcommittee on
the Coronavirus Pandemic
Committee on Oversight and Accountability
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Raul Ruiz
Ranking Member
Select Subcommittee on
the Coronavirus Pandemic
Committee on Oversight and Accountability
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Wenstrup and Ranking Member Ruiz:

The Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) is pleased to submit comments for the record in advance of “A Hearing with Dr. Anthony Fauci.” ASTHO is the national nonprofit organization representing the public health agencies of the 50 states, five U.S. territories, three freely associated states, and Washington, D.C. ASTHO members, the chief health officials of these jurisdictions, are dedicated to formulating and influencing sound public health policy and to ensuring excellence in public health practice. Our comments below reflect these priorities and perspectives.

COVID-19 strained our nation’s public health system. Public health leaders’ attempts to protect the health and well-being of their communities—particularly in the form of mitigation orders—were sometimes met with pushback from a small but vocal portion of the public. What’s more, state and territorial health officials faced unprecedented levels of harassment, intimidation, vandalism, hate speech, threats of violence, and death threats. Health officials were also subject to angry and armed protests at their personal residences as a result of “doxing” (publishing private information such as addresses and contact information to facilitate harassment). Public health officials are public servants, not public enemies, and we must do more to protect and support public health officials at all levels of government. Before the pandemic, health officials primarily worked behind the scenes. However, that transitioned to more public appearances as many were frequently called upon, often with their Governors, to regularly update the general public about interventions to mitigate the spread of the disease. Some health officials needed a security detail to protect themselves and their families.

A study of national media reports and a survey of local health departments between March 2020 and January 2021 identified nearly 1,500 reports of unique forms and targets of

harassment across 57% of departments that responded to the survey.¹ The study identified 222 public health official departures, with one in three reporting harassment as a cause for their resignation.

The threats faced by public health officials have had a profound impact on their morale and the morale of the more than 100,000 government public health professionals. A January 2022 survey showed that nearly one-third of employees were considering leaving their agencies, a trend significantly influenced by the pandemic.² Of those individuals, 30% were more likely to leave due to the pandemic. Furthermore, over 40% of employees “felt bullied, threatened, or harassed by individuals outside the health department.”

Public health officials have demonstrated the utmost dedication and commitment in their valiant service to protect the health and well-being of individuals living in their jurisdictions. Their tireless efforts have saved lives. According to polling by the Harvard School of Public Health, most of the U.S. public feel measures taken by local, state, and federal public health agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic to reduce the spread were “appropriate.”³ Three out of four U.S. adults trust their local public health agency, state public health agency, and CDC for COVID-19 information.

We are collectively responsible for ensuring the public health workforce is supported and able to continue their invaluable contributions to advancing public health and well-being without fear of harassment or worse. ASTHO urges the committee to continue its work in this crucial area and identify how we as a nation can better support the public health workforce during and after public health emergencies.

If you have any questions or require additional information, please contact Jeffrey Ekoma, ASTHO’s senior director of government affairs, at jekoma@astho.org.

Sincerely,



Joseph M. Kanter, MD, MPH
Chief Executive Officer, Association of State and Territorial Health Officials

¹Ward JA, Stone, EM, Paulani M, Resnick B. “Pandemic-Related Workplace Violence and Its Impact on Public Health Officials, March 2020–January 2021.” *American Journal of Public Health* 112, no. 5 (2022): pp. 736-746.

² De Beaumont Foundation. “Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey 2021 Findings.” <https://debeaumont.org/phwins/2021-findings/>. Accessed 5-22-24.

³ Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, National Public Health Information Coalition, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health (2023). “Moving Into the Future.” Accessed 5-22-2024.