

Opening Statement
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Hearing on “Pathway to a Vaccine: Efforts to Develop a Safe, Effective and Accessible COVID-19 Vaccine”
July 21, 2020

Today, we will explore the pursuit of vaccines that could help contain the largest public health crisis the nation has faced in over a century.

The extent of this crisis cannot be overstated. In just six months, more than 3.5 million people in the United States have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and more than 140,000 Americans have died.

Sadly, these numbers will only continue to increase as new COVID-19 cases are surging all across the nation — climbing to nearly 80,000 each day. COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on the country’s physical, mental, and economic well-being, particularly among communities of color and low-income communities.

Today, we will hear from some of the manufacturing companies who have been working with the federal government to develop a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine. I am pleased that you are all with us today so we can hear how federal investments are being used to find a vaccine.

I want to extend special thanks to your colleagues and research teams who are working around the clock to develop a vaccine. Ultimately it will be the collaboration of your efforts, partnership with the Administration and the support of Congress that will make a COVID-19 vaccine possible.

Along those lines, I also appreciate the chance to bring some transparency to the Trump Administration’s Operation Warp Speed efforts. This transparency will be crucial to securing the American people’s trust that a COVID-19 vaccine will be made available only once it’s proven to be safe and effective.

Congress has already taken action to support these vital efforts. This spring, Congress provided billions of dollars for COVID-19 vaccine development and manufacturing efforts, and other medical countermeasures.

Then two months ago, the House passed the Heroes Act. This comprehensive legislation would strengthen the nation’s ability to fight the pandemic by bolstering the Strategic National Stockpile, and increasing funding for research, development, and manufacturing of vaccines and treatments. It would also require the Administration to submit to Congress a vaccine plan

identifying the activities being undertaken to manufacture, distribute, and administer a COVID-19 vaccine safely.

As I said, the House passed the Heroes Act more than two months ago, and yet, the Senate has failed to take it up even as new infection and death rates soar.

This delay is compounded by the fact that so much more could have been done to mitigate the impacts of the disease.

From day one, President Trump has done everything he can to minimize the severity of this pandemic and to undermine his public health experts. The Administration still has not developed a national plan to combat the pandemic, it has no national testing strategy, no one in charge of the supply chain and little effort to invoke the Defense Production Act (DPA).

We are again seeing a resurgence of the same problems that hampered our response efforts this spring, such as testing shortages, PPE and medical supply shortages, and attacks on public health experts.

These problems will likely extend to the development and distribution of a COVID-19 vaccine, as long as Trump is President.

We all want a COVID-19 vaccine to be developed as soon as possible, but before a vaccine is distributed, public health experts must ensure that it is safe, effective, and available to all who need it. My fear is that FDA will be forced by the Trump Administration to approve a vaccine that lacks effectiveness. We also must ensure that our supply chains can safely manufacture the vaccine in the quantities necessary, along with the vials, needles, syringes, and other products required to administer it.

This Committee has a long history of supporting efforts related to vaccine development and deployment. I am hopeful that if we prioritize public health and strategic preparation, and the Administration finally learns from its mistakes, that our collective efforts will result in a safe, effective, and accessible COVID-19 vaccine. And with that I would like to yield the remainder of my time, to Representative Eshoo, the chair of our Health Subcommittee.