

Opening Statement
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.
House Energy and Commerce Committee
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Hearing on “Pathway to a Vaccine: Ensuring a Safe and Effective Vaccine People Will Trust”
September 30, 2020

Today, we will hear from some of the nation’s leading public health experts on one tool that could help put an end to the pandemic and the suffering—a safe, effective, and trusted COVID-19 vaccine. I am pleased that you are all with us today so that expertise and science have their rightful place in these discussions.

We all want a COVID-19 vaccine to be developed as soon as possible. First and foremost, we must confirm that it is safe and effective. And we must ensure it is trusted and accessible to all who need it.

But as I said in our July hearing with vaccine manufacturers, my fear is that the Trump Administration might force the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to approve a vaccine before proven to be safe and effective, in an effort to boost the President’s political fortunes.

I hope this does not happen, and I am grateful that career FDA officials have repeatedly stated the importance of putting science first.

But, since January, President Trump has consistently placed politics over science in the nation’s COVID-19 response, undermining the independence and integrity of our public health agencies and scientific experts.

His words have created confusion among the American people, eroding their trust in our public health institutions. It is little wonder then that polling shows that public trust in a future COVID-19 vaccine has declined drastically over the past few months.

That is why we must build back the confidence of the American people as we work to ensure a safe and effective vaccine is developed.

In the updated Heroes Act introduced earlier this week, we included funding for an evidence-based public awareness campaign to outline the importance of vaccines and combat misinformation—some of which is unfortunately coming from the President himself.

In this new bill, there’s also \$20 billion to authorize the Secretary to provide grants for vaccine and therapeutic development, \$7 billion to conduct activities to enhance, expand and improve vaccine distribution and administration and also language to provide grants to state and local public health departments for procurement of vaccines, public health data and facility enhancement.

I would also remind everyone that the updated Heroes Act provides free treatment, drugs and vaccines, which builds on a similar policy that we included in the CARES Act.

While I regret that Mitch McConnell and President Trump have stood in the way of the Heroes Act, which the House passed in May, I continue to call on Mitch McConnell and President Trump to come to the table to negotiate real help for American families and our public health system.

Unfortunately, in addition to blocking relief for families and fueling concerns that political calculations – and not science – guide its decisions, the Trump Administration is attacking access to a potential COVID-19 vaccine in court. As you know, Madam Chair, the Affordable Care Act required that health insurance plans cover all recommended vaccines without cost sharing for patients.

Should the ACA be struck down completely, as the Administration is trying to do at the Supreme Court in just a few weeks, millions of American families will lose access to health care, including a potential COVID-19 vaccine. This is a national outrage that should concern all Members of this Committee.

I look forward to hearing from the witnesses today. While I think the Trump Administration's actions, if left unchecked, could actually hamper the effort to develop and administer a successful COVID-19 vaccine, I hope our witnesses can advise the panel on what guardrails they hope to see in place to keep that from happening.

Thank you, I yield back.