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Pallone Opening Remarks at Health Subcommittee Hearing on Protecting Scientific Integrity in the COVID-19 Response

Washington, D.C. – Energy and Commerce Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ) delivered the following opening remarks today at a Health Subcommittee hearing on “Protecting Scientific Integrity in the COVID-19 Response:”

Today, we are here as part of the Energy and Commerce Committee’s ongoing work to confront the largest public health and economic crisis of our lifetimes. More than 80,000 Americans have lost their lives to COVID-19, while more than 36 million others have lost their jobs.

This is a national emergency that requires every aspect of government to work together to reduce the spread of this terrible virus so we can confidently begin to reopen our economy. While this Congress and the President have worked together to enact four laws to combat the pandemic and provide economic assistance to the American people, new laws are simply not enough.

President Trump and his Administration have failed to provide the consistent and stable leadership that is necessary to guide our nation through this public health and economic crisis. For months, the President has delivered mixed messages and misinformation to the American people, creating confusion across the nation.

Instead of showing leadership, competence and vision in a time of crisis, the Administration is abdicating its responsibility and forcing states to fend for themselves and find their own way out of this pandemic.

While states and frontline health care workers were pleading for personal protective equipment, testing supplies and other resources to protect them and their patients, President Trump’s response was to let states fight it out on the open market.

For months, the President has refused to develop and implement a national testing program. For months, we've been promised millions of tests were right around the corner. The promises have been hollow — testing is getting better, but nowhere near where it needs to be. It doesn't help that the President proclaimed about testing earlier this week that, "We have met the moment and we have prevailed." That could not be further from the truth.

Dr. Rick Bright, the former Director of BARDA, has come forward as a whistleblower and made serious allegations — including a lack of urgency by Administration officials to respond to the virus, mismanagement and failure to procure necessary supplies, and disregard for public health and scientific integrity.

His claims lie at the heart of this Committee's concerns regarding the Administration's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We are here today to hear the perspective of Dr. Bright who is positioned to discuss the Administration's preparation and response to this pandemic.

The failures we have seen simply cannot persist — that's why this Committee continues to conduct robust oversight and to propose bold legislative solutions. We've been demanding answers and information from the Administration on testing, contact tracing, the supply chain, food safety and the safety of food production workers, and attempts to undermine science and public health. To date, we have yet to receive any sufficient responses from this Administration.

As for legislation, Congress has already passed four major coronavirus response packages that were improved by the work of this Committee. And now, with the sense of urgency this moment requires, earlier this week we proposed The Heroes Act, which is to be voted on tomorrow by the full House.

This legislation continues our ongoing commitment to providing the health care resources and support needed to combat the coronavirus crisis. Our legislation will strengthen testing and contact tracing by finally requiring the Administration to develop comprehensive plans, with clear benchmarks and timelines, and public reporting of key metrics. This will allow transparency so we can see if the Trump Administration is fulfilling their promises and hold them accountable if they are not. We also provide \$75 billion — to support robust testing, contact tracing, surveillance and containment activities. We simply cannot beat this virus without these efforts in place.

Our legislation also ensures that all COVID-19 treatments and vaccines are free of cost-sharing for patients.

The bill will help us shore up our public health infrastructure for the long road ahead.

Our top priority is the health and safety of the American people. The Heroes Act builds on the progress we have made and lays the foundation we will need to ease social distancing and safely reopen the economy.

I thank Dr. Bright for coming forward and for being here today. I'm hopeful that this hearing will help us better understand the failures of this Administration so that collectively we can find solutions that will help us finally get a handle on this virus. It is the only way we will be able to protect the American people, and safely and confidently reopen our communities.

Thank you, and I yield back.

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