

Committee on Energy and Commerce

**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.**

Hearing on “The Fiscal Year 2022 HHS Budget”

May 12, 2021

At last year’s hearing with the Trump Administration, Democrats highlighted the implications of massive cuts that were being proposed to vital health programs while, simultaneously, hearing federal witnesses attest to the terrifying potential of the then-new virus known as COVID-19.

The Biden Administration’s fiscal year 2022 budget request is, comparatively, a breath of fresh air. We can now bolster our Nation’s public health agencies by acting on this request.

Overall, the request includes \$131.7 billion for HHS and its adjoining agencies, a 23.5 percent increase from the 2021 enacted level. This includes critical investments to improve our nation’s public health preparedness, such as \$905 million for the Strategic National Stockpile and \$8.7 billion for capacity improvements and public health threat detection and assistance at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). If enacted, this would be the largest budgetary increase for CDC in nearly 20 years.

The request also includes funding for vital safety net programs and for addressing health inequities in COVID-19 and beyond. It increases funding for CDC’s Social Determinants of Health program, aims to reduce maternal mortality and morbidity through strengthening Maternal Mortality Review Committees, and provides a funding increase to the Indian Health Service. It also provides an 18 percent budget increase for the Title X Family Planning program. The program has historically served over 4 million low-income people a year by providing critical screenings and health services.

The Administration’s budget request would also expand cross-agency research capabilities to combat life-threatening diseases. Through the National Institutes of Health, it would establish the Advanced Research Projects Agency-Health, or ARPA-H, a research agency that would initially focus on diseases such as cancer, diabetes, and Alzheimer’s. I look forward to learning more about how the proposed agency’s activities may build off NIH’s existing research to find lifesaving cures.

Lastly, the budget request also makes significant investments in improving mental health and combating the opioid epidemic. It would provide \$1.6 billion to the Community Mental Health Services Block Grant and \$10.7 billion to fight the opioid crisis, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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These investments are bold and necessary, but we must not stop there. The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the impacts chronic underfunding of public health has had on our surveillance, preparedness, and response efforts. It is my hope to work with the Biden Administration to ensure rebuilding our public health infrastructure is a key component of any jobs and infrastructure plan.

We must also take action to lower the cost of prescription drugs for the American people by passing H.R. 3, the Elijah E. Cummings Lower Drug Costs Now Act. And we must make permanent the enhanced premium tax credits that we enacted into law on a temporary basis in the American Rescue Plan.

The Administration recently announced that nearly a million Americans signed up for health coverage during the Special Enrollment period and the enhanced subsidies are reducing monthly premiums by over 40 percent.

We must ensure that low-income Americans have access to quality, affordable coverage. Now is the time to finish the work we began over a decade ago with the Affordable Care Act by once and for all closing the coverage gap, and ensuring that people have access to the protections of Medicaid regardless of what state they live in. We should also make permanent the American Rescue Plan's option to allow state Medicaid programs to cover women for 12 months postpartum.

The Trump Administration forcibly separated children from their families, causing terrible damage to not only the children, but the ORR program itself. Yet during their time in charge, Energy and Commerce Republicans refused to hold even a single hearing to examine what was happening and hold the Trump Administration accountable for their outrageous actions.

The Biden Administration was left with a decimated system, but is working to process these children humanely. Thanks to the leadership of Secretary Becerra, I will hold a hearing within the next month in our Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee where the head of ORR will testify and we will examine how the ORR program is functioning.

I look forward to hearing from the Secretary today, and to working on our shared priorities moving forward.

I yield back.