

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, ranking member Scalise, and honorable members of the committee for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Sophia Bush and I am a storyteller. As an actress, an activist, an entrepreneur, and the host of the *Work In Progress* podcast, I have committed myself to learning about people and communities, so that I might highlight the change makers working to unite and propel us all toward a better future. In being afforded the opportunity to tell people's stories I have found both my personal purpose and a passion for what lies ahead for us as a nation, and I feel privileged to be able to have this opportunity to uplift their voices.

In early 2020, like so many of my fellow citizens, my workplace shut down, and shortly thereafter I locked down at home. I was *terrified* of COVID. As a child with severe asthma, I suffered bouts of pneumonia that further weakened my respiratory system. As an adult, what might present as a seasonal cold for my coworkers, has quickly turned into bouts of bronchitis that have sent me to the hospital for emergency breathing treatments. Even with the unearned privilege of my less at-risk group — one with better racial outcomes — and with the financial ability to access quality healthcare, I wondered if I would be one of the young Americans to suffer severe complications, or to carry a deadly virus home to my family.

I was inspired by the urgency with which the global health community mobilized to sequence the virus, and develop the vaccine, all thanks to decades of research on coronaviruses. Researchers around the world collaborated like never before, in response to the greatest threat to public health in our lifetimes.

So the moment I was able to, I jumped at the chance to get my vaccine. To protect myself, my parents, my coworkers, and friends' families. I jumped at the opportunity to take my best friend to get her mRNA vaccine. She was five months pregnant at the time, and has a clotting disorder. That made her *cautious* about receiving a vaccine, but being acutely aware of what contracting COVID could mean for her and her baby, she too jumped at the chance to protect them both once experts confirmed the vaccine's safety for pregnant women. I drove us home with tears in my eyes that day. I also cried the day my parents received their second mRNA vaccine dose.

Because for me, vaccines have always represented love. My grandfather, a United States Navy man, used to tell me stories about polio. My mother,

too, remembers the relief when her family stood in line for that vaccine. Vaccines are love, born out of a desire to protect our loved ones. And I believe that in innovation, we see the best of America. *That's* where we're exceptional. From skyscrapers to airplanes, eventually landing on the moon, we are innovators. The COVID vaccine is our generation's shot at a moon landing. A step for humankind, made possible by science.

Two of the largest groups of unvaccinated people exist in communities of color and rural populations. There have been concerted disinformation and misinformation campaigns by anti-vaccine leaders to discourage communities, including these, from vaccinating themselves against COVID-19. We cannot allow people dubbed a threat to the nation by our own intelligence agencies, no matter if they are anonymous internet marauders, or members of this very governing body, to peddle disinformation that keeps us from protecting ourselves and others. Medicine is not partisan. Science is not partisan. Public health must be supported — to the best of this nation's ability — by non-partisan political will. It's on all of us to remind our loved ones that this pandemic is not over. New variants — including the more transmissible Delta variant — are circulating at an alarming rate.

Even before the proliferation of variants, experts were anticipating a fourth wave in areas with low vaccination rates. We were warned, just this week, that we could see dense outbreaks in rural areas because not enough of those communities are vaccinated. And on the subject of community inequity, Black and Brown communities have also suffered unspeakable losses throughout the pandemic. It should come as no surprise that People of Color felt abandoned by their government in 2020, and thus many have *hesitated* to believe the government would protect them against COVID-19. We must come to terms with our history of medical trauma and abuse on Black and Brown Americans.

Providing culturally competent, evidence-based, messaging must continue if we want to prevent more devastation this Fall. We need to spread the word about where people can find more information *about* the COVID vaccines. My dear friend and science communication lead for The COVID Tracking Project, Jessica Malaty Rivera likes to say, "science isn't finished until it's communicated...with empathy." We must work to make sure that our policies, and the ways in which we communicate the science and data are *trustworthy, transparent, and inclusive*.

Public health must be our number one priority. By nature, public health requires us to work on behalf of the *public*. Our doctors and researchers do. Each of *us* can do the same by standing up for our communities, and getting vaccinated to stop the spread. Science arms us to defend ourselves and one another.

And to my fellow millennials, and the innovative Gen Zers, we are looking at *you*. Reclaim your academic institutions, movie theatres, proms, and music festivals, in person! Please, get vaccinated to protect yourselves and your loved ones. I genuinely believe that together, we can do this.

Thank you.