

Opening Statement
Chair Diana DeGette
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Pathway to a Vaccine: Efforts to Develop a Safe, Effective and Accessible COVID-19 Vaccine”
July 21, 2020

Today, the Energy and Commerce Committee continues its oversight of the nation’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today’s hearing will examine efforts to develop a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine. I know I speak for all of us this morning in saying that we are all rooting for a vaccine to be developed, manufactured, and accessible for all Americans as soon as possible.

This Committee and Congress have long-supported federal efforts to advance the development and availability of novel vaccines. This spring, we provided billions of additional dollars in new funding to support vaccine research, development, and manufacturing efforts—funds that are assisting some of the companies testifying today in developing COVID-19 vaccines.

This Committee has a responsibility to conduct oversight of these investments. Today, we’ll have the opportunity to hear directly from some of the manufacturers working on potential COVID-19 vaccines and how the funds Congress provided are being put to use in these unprecedented times. I thank the witnesses for being willing to participate in such a critical hearing.

We are now six months into this national public health crisis and COVID-19 case numbers are continuing to climb at a staggering rate. To date, more than 140,000 Americans have lost their lives.

As long as the Trump Administration continues to shirk its responsibility to lead a coordinated, national response effort, sicknesses and deaths will continue to mount.

It is also clear that we will not be able to contain COVID-19 in the United States without a rapid and robust deployment of public health measures and medical countermeasures—including a safe and effective vaccine.

We know that containing the virus as soon as possible is of utmost importance. Millions of Americans face continued unemployment and loss of health insurance. Across the country, parents are making impossibly hard decisions about child care and school participation. And frontline health workers, essential employees, people of color, seniors, and others most vulnerable to COVID-19 face daily threats to their survival.

Fortunately, there are reasons to be optimistic that the search for a COVID-19 vaccine is headed in the right direction.

According to statements from several of the companies testifying today and based on the speed at which they are progressing through clinical trials, it is possible that a COVID-19 vaccine may become available by the end of this year or early next year. That is a rare bit of good news in these harrowing days.

But while some public health experts are bullish on the development of a vaccine, we must remind ourselves that plenty can still go wrong, and any anticipated timeline is not guaranteed.

Determining a vaccine's safety and efficacy is merely the first of many challenges that must be addressed if we are to successfully manufacture and distribute a vaccine to Americans and people around the globe.

While we await the results of clinical trials, the necessary manufacturing capacity and distribution infrastructure must be bolstered so an eventual vaccine is readily available for hundreds of millions of Americans once it is determined to be safe and effective.

Additionally, as the global pursuit of a COVID-19 vaccine speeds forward, we must be prepared, not only to produce the vaccine itself, but also to have the supplies required to administer the vaccine, such as vials and syringes.

Last month, this Committee heard from governors across the country just how unprepared we were as a nation to provide basic testing supplies such as swabs and reagents and personal protective equipment, or "PPE." The lack of these supplies undermined our response effort and we are still feeling the effect today.

I remain concerned that with all the efforts around the world to develop a vaccine, governments and manufacturers—like with testing supplies and PPE—may all be competing for a limited supply of items such as glass vials and syringes. These supplies are critical in ultimately delivering a vaccine should one prove successful.

Further, critical decisions must be made now across the federal government, industry, and public health stakeholders regarding vaccine roll-out efforts and public and provider education. This is especially true given that the value of any future COVID-19 vaccine lies in the willingness of the American people to get vaccinated and their ability to access and afford it.

Developing and distributing a COVID-19 vaccine requires a national plan. One that the Trump Administration has stated is still being developed—despite this Committee urging the Administration to adopt such a plan two months ago. But time is of the essence and now is the time to prepare for a nationwide vaccine program.

If developed, a vaccine will be instrumental in protecting the health and well-being of the nation. While we are all rooting for your collective success, we must make sure that it is safe, effective, and ultimately affordable to all Americans who need it. This Committee will continue to conduct oversight to ensure these goals remain the focus of the pursuit for a COVID-19 vaccine.