

Committee on Energy and Commerce

**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Chair Diana DeGette**

Hearing on “Pathway to Protection: Expanding Availability of COVID-19 Vaccines”

February 23, 2021

Today, the Subcommittee continues its oversight of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past year, we have held hearings examining various aspects of this crisis, including the federal government’s response to COVID-19, the ramping up of testing, and the development of vaccines.

Last July, we heard testimony from several of the companies represented at today’s hearing about the status of their clinical trials and production plans, as they worked to develop a safe and effective vaccine.

Now, we are back today in a much better position to fight COVID-19. With two vaccines authorized, and possibly more on the way, we are now in the midst of one of the most important public health campaigns in American history.

It is often said, vaccines don’t save lives—vaccinations do. As we approach the grim milestone of half a million American deaths from COVID-19, we have not had much reason to celebrate. But with this vaccination program underway, there is hope that we can begin to turn the tide against the virus.

It is nothing short of a scientific marvel that multiple COVID-19 vaccines have been demonstrated to be safe and effective in such a short amount of time. But we are not out of the woods.

The most pressing challenge now is the lack of supply of vaccine doses. We saw the frustration late last year when the initial vaccine allocations to states were less than what was needed to vaccinate high-risk, priority populations.

And while we continue to commend manufacturers’ efforts to develop these vaccines, some of the companies here today are still short of the number of doses they promised to initially deliver when they last testified before this Subcommittee in July.

Many of these companies received significant federal investment to build their manufacturing capacity last year while their clinical trials were still ongoing, so that we would be able to rapidly deliver millions of vaccines as soon as they were authorized. Two vaccines have been authorized and production is ramping up, but there is still insufficient supply to meet current demand.

Things have improved lately, with the companies increasing production and the Biden Administration increasing weekly allocations to states as well as providing greater transparency around future allocations. And with additional companies seeking authorizations, we have hope that supply will continue to expand in the coming months.

But we still face a lack of vaccine supply to meet current demand. Americans around the country are lining up—sometimes for hours—to secure their shot. Many high-risk individuals still have not been vaccinated, and millions more are waiting eagerly for their turn to come.

President Biden said last week that every American who wants a vaccine should be able to get one by the end of July. That is a welcome goal, and one that the companies joining us today will play a central role in hopefully achieving.

That is why it is critical for us to hear today a straightforward assessment from each company about where their manufacturing capacity stands, how much vaccine they anticipate being able to produce, and when they believe they will meet those milestones.

Indeed, emerging virus variants may require us to develop entirely new vaccines or booster shots. If needed, these shots will only put more pressure on manufacturing capacity.

This hearing is an opportunity to examine ideas to help speed-up this vaccination effort—whether it is something that companies could be doing differently or something more the federal government could be doing to help. We are all in this together, so we look forward to exploring solutions today.

Finally, while these vaccines are undoubtedly good news, we must remember that they are only part of the solution to ending this pandemic. Although the authorized vaccines are highly effective at preventing you from getting seriously ill from COVID-19, they might not prevent you from unknowingly spreading the virus to others.

Therefore, it is essential that Americans continue mitigation efforts like wearing masks and practicing social distancing—even those who have been vaccinated. These vaccines will be an enormous aid in fighting this virus, but we all need to do our part if we are going to defeat it.

I thank the witnesses for being here today. The ongoing work of these companies is critically important to the country and the world, and this Committee stands ready to assist in those efforts.