

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.

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

February 23, 2021

Today, we continue our critical oversight of the effort to develop and produce COVID-19 vaccines for the American people. As I have said before, one of my top priorities this year is to ensure we have the tools and resources needed to crush the virus. I do believe it's a new day because, unlike Trump, under Biden we have a national plan to get vaccines, testing, contact tracing, and supplies out to states. But we do need to have the tools and resources for that national plan. And we're going to do that with the reconciliation act. Among the most powerful tools in our arsenal are safe and effective vaccines. That's why this Committee is working tirelessly to find solutions for rapidly expanding the availability of COVID-19 vaccines across the country.

The pain and devastation inflicted by this pandemic cannot be overstated. As we mark the tragedy of half a million lives lost to COVID-19 in the United States, nearly 10 million jobs have been lost and long-term unemployment is on the rise. Life expectancy in the United States fell by an entire year in the first half of 2020—a decline not seen since World War II—with communities of color suffering the largest declines.

In order to achieve herd immunity, which is essential to ultimately defeating this virus, we must vaccinate the majority of the population. That starts with securing widespread access to vaccines and ensuring reliable production lines are in place.

Unfortunately, the initial vaccine rollout under the Trump Administration was mired in confusion, poor planning, and limited supply. Thankfully, the Biden Administration has taken decisive action to get the vaccination effort back on track.

Just last week, President Biden announced that states will receive their largest weekly dose allocations—a 57 percent overall increase from when he took office. The Administration also announced it was doubling the number of doses being sent directly to pharmacies and will begin sending vaccines directly to community health centers—actions that will facilitate broader access across the country.

Thanks to these efforts, we're already seeing encouraging results. Before the disruptions caused by last week's devastating winter storm, an average of 1.7 million vaccine doses were being administered per day—marking a nearly twofold increase over the past month. While this trend is promising, many experts believe we need to be administering closer to 3 million doses per day to stay ahead of the virus.

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I recognize this goal is challenging, but the stakes of our nationwide vaccination campaign could not be higher. A protracted rollout would not only result in more Americans becoming infected; it could also increase the likelihood that new variants will become dominant in the United States.

As I noted at this Subcommittee's last hearing, we are currently in a race to keep vaccines ahead of new virus variants. And in order to win this race, we must increase our vaccine supply as swiftly as possible.

Today, we will hear from five leading manufacturers of COVID-19 vaccines. We must acknowledge that there have been setbacks on vaccine production and supply.

Congress needs to hear what steps each company is taking to rapidly expand vaccine production, what hurdles might stand in the way, and what additional help is needed to increase supply. Simply put, all options must be on the table.

While increasing vaccine supply is essential, much more is needed to actually vaccinate hundreds of millions of Americans quickly and equitably. To that end, Democrats in Congress are moving swiftly to pass the American Rescue Plan—a bold proposal from the Biden Administration that commits the resources and support needed to bring an end to this pandemic.

This legislation would invest more than \$20 billion to expand the federal government's ongoing work to aggressively ramp up vaccine distribution and administration—including by establishing mobile vaccination units in underserved communities, expanding community vaccination centers, and facilitating clear communication with the public.

I was pleased that this Committee passed its portions of this legislation without delay, and the full House will vote on this legislation later this week. I look forward to getting a bill on President Biden's desk as soon as possible.

I want to thank our witnesses for taking the time to be with us today. Your work is vital to our fight against COVID-19, and this Committee recognizes your extraordinary efforts.

If we all work together, I am confident that this historic vaccination campaign will succeed—and we will defeat COVID-19.