

**Committee on Energy and Commerce**

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

***Hearing on “Road to Recovery: Ramping Up COVID-19 Vaccines, Testing, and Medical Supply Chain”***

**February 3, 2021**

I want to welcome everyone back for our first Health Subcommittee hearing of the 117th Congress. There is no more pressing issue to begin with than the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, our response so far, and our need to increase vaccinations, testing, and mitigation, and building a robust supply chain.

This pandemic is taking a devastating toll on families and communities all around our nation. More than 440,000 Americans have died from this terrible virus, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has projected that number will grow to more than 500,000 before the end of the month. As Americans, we mourn every loss. As Members of Congress, we must do everything we can to ensure this new Administration has all the tools and resources it needs to crush COVID-19.

With President Biden in the White House, I am confident that we can move forward with comprehensive action to stem the tide on this virus, bring relief to struggling families, and rebuild our economy.

One of the first orders of business will be jumpstarting and sustaining a robust vaccination program. After the scientific breakthrough of two safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines, and hopefully more on the way, we must do more to confront the challenge of getting the vaccines into people’s arms.

Unfortunately, the Trump Administration failed to prepare and provide resources for a national vaccination campaign, and never developed a comprehensive national vaccine plan. Instead, the Administration pushed all responsibility for distributing and administering vaccines to the states and then they made that job nearly impossible when they opposed providing the states with additional resources to do it. This failure of leadership led to only three million Americans being vaccinated by the end of the year – far short of the 20 million the Administration had promised.

Yesterday, we heard from states on the front lines about these vaccination challenges. While we were pleased to hear about how they have improved vaccination rates in recent weeks, they underscored the need for additional resources and clear, consistent communication as they work to get vaccines in arms. Their insight is critical as we chart a better path forward.

In December, Congress stepped up and provided \$8.75 billion for vaccine distribution activities, including \$4.5 billion to states in the final omnibus and COVID relief package. Vaccination rates are increasing but if we are to accelerate both production and vaccinations, more resources are needed, especially resources dedicated to the most vulnerable, hard-to-reach Americans.

The same can be said for ongoing needs related to testing and contact tracing. From the early days of the pandemic, public health experts and House Democrats were calling for a comprehensive, national testing strategy that would ensure testing supplies were allocated efficiently and tests were available to all who needed them. Unfortunately, just like with vaccines, the Trump Administration never created a comprehensive, national strategy and turned over virtually all responsibilities to the states, with little support or guidance.

Testing reagents and supplies like pipettes have continued to face shortages, and as new outbreaks have occurred, new bottlenecks in testing have followed. While we work to vaccinate all Americans, access to reliable, efficient, and speedy testing, contact tracing, and mitigation support will continue to be critical if we are to reduce transmission and community spread.

We also need a more robust and reliable medical supply chain. While states are administering more COVID-19 vaccines, they are running up against supply shortages of vaccine doses, but also the ancillary medical supplies such as syringes that are used to extract every available dose. And while some early therapeutics have been authorized by the FDA, their limited availability has curbed their impact. We also continue to face supply challenges for administering tests, like reagents and swabs. And supply challenges remain for critical personal protective equipment for medical personnel, including in nursing homes, vaccinators, and the public health workforce.

I am pleased that President Biden has taken swift and decisive action to improve our response to the pandemic, but crushing the virus requires more action from Congress, as well. President Biden has proposed the American Rescue Plan, which includes \$20 billion in funds for vaccine distribution and administration, public awareness, and additional resources for improving our supply of vaccines, therapeutics, and ancillary supplies. It invests \$50 billion for testing and contact tracing, including expanding community-based and mobile testing sites. And it includes \$10 billion to help support expansion of medical supply manufacturing capacity.

Congress needs to move President Biden's American Rescue Plan as quickly as possible. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about their thoughts on the nation's response to the pandemic so far and how we can improve going forward.