

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Chair Diana DeGette

Hearing on “Leading the Way Forward: Biden Administration Actions to Increase COVID-19 Vaccinations”

March 17, 2021

Today, the Subcommittee continues its oversight of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Since its beginning, we have examined many aspects of this crisis, including vital efforts to develop, distribute, and administer COVID-19 vaccines.

In previous hearings this year, we heard from state health officials who provided their on-the-ground assessments of the national vaccination effort and from vaccine manufacturers who updated us on efforts to ramp up vaccine production.

Today, we will hear from the Biden Administration on where our historic vaccination campaign currently stands and how we will get America fully vaccinated.

As we pass the one-year anniversary of this national emergency, it is difficult to fathom the devastating losses we have endured.

More than 532,000 Americans have lost their lives, millions more have lost their jobs, and countless businesses have suffered. The long-term effects on our children, our nation’s mental health, and the many COVID “long-haul” survivors are still unknown.

At the same time, we have also been awed by the resilience of the American people and the remarkable progress we have made in the fight against the pandemic.

We are proud of our government scientists—including two of them who are here with us today—who worked alongside their scientific colleagues in private industry to bring us three safe and effective vaccines, with potentially more to come.

These scientists and many others have worked tirelessly throughout the last year, and we thank them for their work. Efforts to develop COVID-19 vaccines were possible due to investments made by Congress and through extraordinary public-private partnerships.

While we celebrate these remarkable successes, we must acknowledge the reality that vaccine development was only the first step. As we have said time and again, vaccines don’t save lives, vaccinations do.

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Fortunately, the Biden Administration continues to take concrete steps to end the pandemic. Weekly vaccine supply has more than doubled since President Biden took office, and vaccinations have risen to as many as 2.9 million shots a day.

And President Biden has assured America that by the end of May, we should have enough supply to vaccinate all adults.

The Administration has also worked to ensure wider vaccine distribution through community health centers, local pharmacies, and FEMA mass vaccination sites, increasing access for particularly vulnerable populations and underserved Americans.

In Colorado, we have seen the benefits of working with community-based organizations to bring vaccination clinics into underserved areas, and we look forward to expanding those efforts.

Thankfully, even more help is on the way. The American Rescue Plan, which was passed by Congress and signed into law last week by President Biden, will further boost vaccinations and testing across the country, provide desperately needed funding to support American families, and invests resources to help schools reopen for safe in-person instruction.

While the veil begins to lift on COVID-19, we must remain vigilant. Now is not the time to become complacent. We must continue to take critical public health measures such as masking and social distancing.

Additionally, vaccine hesitancy and access disparities persist across many communities. Federal, state, and local leaders must work together to reach these communities, address their concerns, and provide access to these lifesaving vaccines.

Today, we are joined by some of our nation's top public health officials. We are pleased to welcome back Dr. Anthony Fauci and Dr. Peter Marks to the Committee. We are grateful for their leadership and steady presence throughout this entire pandemic.

We are also pleased to welcome Dr. Rochelle Walensky, who is testifying before Congress for the first time in her new role as the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For too long, the voices of CDC experts were stifled, so I am grateful for her commitment to ensuring that science is driving our nation's pandemic response.

Thank you to our witnesses for sharing your valuable time and for the tireless work of you and your public health colleagues across the government.

I look forward to hearing from you today on how we can ensure equitable access, strengthen vaccine confidence, increase vaccination rates across the country, and help defeat the new variants in the months ahead.

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While the light at the end of the tunnel is visible now, it will continue to grow only if we remember what brought us here: listening to science and following the guidance from our public health experts.

If we all do our part, we can end this pandemic. And this Committee will continue to do its part by continuing our bipartisan oversight over this critical subject, which we have aggressively pursued since the beginning of this pandemic.