

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

Hearing on “Empowered by Data: Legislation to Advance Equity and Public Health”

June 24, 2021

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Federal, State, and local public health leaders have faced barriers to collecting and accessing the data needed to fully respond to a public health crisis. It is this vital data that provides government officials and health leaders the critical insight needed to develop the best guidance and response to public health crises. As a result of these barriers, public health departments at all levels of government have, at times, lacked the information they needed to better understand the significant impacts of the pandemic on our most vulnerable communities.

Unfortunately, the U.S. public health surveillance infrastructure was fragmented and inconsistent long before this pandemic. Insufficient funding, limited resources, inadequate training combined with differing state and county laws, and nonexistent data standardization procedures are several of the many factors that limit public health data.

The slate of bills we are considering today will make targeted improvements across three key areas. First, we will discuss establishing a uniform, federal strategic action plan, as well as data standards, and data sharing policies. Second, several of the bills we’re considering will improve the collection of public health data that reveals the drivers of health inequities. And third, we will discuss proposals to assist states in the creation of the public health data infrastructure necessary to appropriately deploy resources and essential interventions.

I commend the Chair and sponsors of these bills for their leadership on advancing policy solutions for some of our country’s most pressing health policy concerns. Public health data is essential to the health of our country. This data allows us to understand which communities need resources, how many and when. It allows us to better target health inequities and address them accordingly. Public health data also gives government and local leaders the ability to make upstream policy changes and implement prevention work.

Many of the bills we will discuss today also address the importance of better understanding and researching social determinants of health to improve the overall health status of the United States. These bills take steps to eliminate the lingering health inequities that exist and burden some of our most vulnerable communities.

Uniform data collection is imperative to better understanding the inequities in our health care system and to guide real change. To effectively adapt interventions designed to advance health equity, we must be able to standardize and collect data related to key social conditions.

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We will hear from the witnesses today about legislation that will help give states the tools they need to design effective interventions to address certain social determinants of health. These interventions will also improve the health and well-being of some of our most vulnerable populations, including by expanding access to evidence-based tobacco cessation treatment through the Medicaid program.

Finding comprehensive solutions to our fragmented public health data is of the utmost importance. With resources that Congress has provided through COVID-19 relief packages, including the CARES Act and the American Rescue Plan, we know that data modernization is underway. We must now continue that work to ensure that research labs, providers and public health departments are working with real-time, current data and have a better understanding of social determinants of health. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses and working together with my colleagues on the legislative proposals before us today.

Thank you, I yield back.