

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

Hearing on “Putting Kids First: Addressing COVID-19’s Impacts on Children”

September 22, 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic has been one of our nation’s most challenging periods. This Committee has worked tirelessly to ensure that the nation has the resources necessary to combat the pandemic, and I want to thank Chair DeGette for her Subcommittee’s continued laser focus on efforts to end the pandemic.

Helping Americans navigate safely through this public health crisis has been at the heart of these efforts and today, we continue that focus by examining the ways the pandemic is affecting our children.

As kids across the country head back to school, communities and families are now struggling with the Delta variant, a far more infectious version of the virus.

Experts refer to the current wave of infections as a “pandemic of the unvaccinated.” And yet, while safe and effective vaccines are available to American adults and adolescents, children under the age of 12 are not yet eligible for those vaccines. As the more contagious Delta variant continues to spread, the number of children with COVID-19 continues to climb. Pediatric units around the nation, but particularly in states with low vaccination rates, are seeing a surge in hospitalizations. This is understandably concerning to parents who just want to keep their children safe.

It is on all of us to do everything that we can to keep them safe. We all have a part to play in getting vaccinated, practicing safety precautions, and looking out for one another. Critically, it is important that government leaders follow the science so that we keep our children safe. State and local actions that ignore or even contradict the science put our children at risk and undermine our ability to end this pandemic.

It is also important to understand that children are experiencing this pandemic differently than adults. Difficult choices are often made for them by parents, caregivers, and teachers. And, more than ever before, children and their families are being forced to balance numerous, complicated risks.

The mental health of our children, in particular, is of great concern. There were already challenges in addressing the mental health needs of children before the pandemic. Those challenges have been exacerbated by increased social isolation; missed milestones such as graduations; and sick or lost family members, friends, or caregivers. We must continue to find

ways to address the mental health needs of our children so that they not only survive through the pandemic but thrive once it is over.

This Committee, Congress, and the Biden administration have taken important steps in providing schools, health care institutions, and families with much-needed resources.

Earlier this year, Congress passed the American Rescue Plan, which provided funding for the safe operation of schools and expansion of pediatric mental health care. And just last week, this Committee passed the Build Back Better Act, which among other critical public health provisions, includes a permanent extension of the Children's Health Insurance Program and investments in children's mental health programs.

The Biden administration has taken bold action to support the safe reopening of schools. This includes significant efforts to increase the vaccination rate of adults and children over 12, which can build a blanket of protection for the children around them. I am also encouraged by reports that at least one vaccine manufacturer may be submitting an application for a COVID-19 vaccine for children very soon. The Food and Drug Administration has said it intends to act on that application when it comes within a matter of weeks.

And the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has issued critical guidance throughout the pandemic, including guidance for health care providers, community and business leaders, and recent guidance for educators and school administrators.

It will continue to take all of us working together to keep our children safe. I thank our witnesses for joining us today to share their expertise and perspectives on what more we can do to protect America's children as we strive to end the pandemic. Together, we must navigate the challenges of providing for the safety of the nation's children and do everything in our power to ensure healthy and promising futures.