

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

***Hearing on “Lessons from the Frontline: COVID-19’s Impact on American Health Care”***

**March 2, 2022**

Today, the Committee will continue our oversight of the ongoing COVID-19 response by hearing from frontline health care workers who have served their communities throughout the pandemic. Their experiences offer valuable insights into our current response and ways we can be better prepared for future public health emergencies.

Nearly four-and-a-half million Americans have been hospitalized due to COVID-19 and more than 930,000 Americans have lost their lives.

No one has been unaffected by the pandemic, though seniors have been particularly vulnerable to the disease and communities of color have faced disproportionate impacts. Essential workers and frontline responders—such as the health care workers joining us today—have faced additional risks and burdens.

Over the last two months, the Omicron variant ripped through our communities, spreading quicker than prior variants. While Omicron appears to have peaked, this experience has shown that we must remain vigilant as new variants emerge.

We must continue to use the tools available to us to prevent transmission of COVID-19 and protect the most vulnerable among us.

Evidence shows that being fully vaccinated and boosted is the most effective way to fight COVID-19 and its impacts on our community. This remained true even during the spread of the Omicron variant, where unvaccinated Americans continued to face a greater risk of severe disease and death than those fully vaccinated.

Yet today in the United States, only 69 percent of eligible Americans are fully vaccinated and just 45 percent have gotten a booster dose. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about the efforts they’ve found successful in encouraging people to get the vaccine and the booster dose.

Because unfortunately, despite all the available tools, the pandemic continues to substantially strain our nation’s health care system. The pandemic is exacerbating long-standing workforce shortages, capacity issues, and barriers to access for people of color and other underserved communities.

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As COVID-19 surges caused patients to overwhelm hospitals and medical facilities, health care workers have faced both mental and physical challenges. They are experiencing work overload, burnout, and increased anxiety or depression—with women, Black, and Hispanic health care workers reporting higher stressors.

And, as different variants have emerged, hospital capacity has, at times, surpassed the number of staffed beds available. This week, more than 75 percent of ICU beds in hospitals across the United States remain occupied despite the fact that the Omicron wave has crested.

This strain not only adds to health care worker burden but can affect patient care and potentially their health. Capacity constraints, fear of contracting COVID-19, and other barriers to health care led to four in ten adults delaying or avoiding medical care in the early days of the pandemic. One in eight adults—and an even higher rate for Black and Hispanic adults—postponed emergency care.

Delayed preventive care and diagnoses can lead to chronic, life-threatening illnesses. As the pandemic continues, we must contend with these broader and longer-term impacts on Americans' health.

Fortunately, Congress and the Biden Administration have taken action to support America's health care workforce and protect the health and safety of all Americans. The American Rescue Plan and the CARES Act provided billions of dollars in funding to address worker retention and wellness, and resources for health care providers serving children, low-income individuals, and seniors.

Then, last November, this Committee passed legislation that would provide support to the health care workforce and expand access to important preventative services. The House-passed Build Back Better Act also included key provisions to invest in public health infrastructure and the health care workforce.

The Biden Administration has also made hundreds of millions of tests and masks and COVID-19 vaccines and therapies available to Americans at no cost.

These are critical steps to supporting the nation's health care system and the public's health, but more must be done to ease the burden on health care workers and bolster capacity.

I am grateful for the tireless commitment our nation's health care workers have shown for the last two years, and look forward to hearing from our witnesses about their experiences on the frontlines. Together we can strengthen America's continued response to the COVID-19 crisis.