

House Appropriations Committee, Labor, HHS, and Related Agencies Subcommittee

COVID-19 Response

May 6, 2020

10:00 am, 2359 Rayburn House Office Building

Purpose

The purpose of this hearing was to examine the federal government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and identify appropriate strategies for mitigating the impact moving forward.

Members Present

Chairman Delauro, Ranking Member Cole, Representatives Clark, Harris, Bustos, Herrera Beutler, and Watson Coleman.

Witnesses

Dr. Tom Frieden, President and CEO of Resolve to Save Lives, and former Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Dr. Caitlin Rivers, Senior Scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, Assistant Professor in the Department of Environmental Health and Engineering at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Opening Statements

Chairman Delauro said that today's hearing is of vital importance. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has thus far been bipartisan. However, the White House has continued to mismanage the nation's response to this health crisis. She emphasized that she is remarkably upset about the lack of personal protective equipment and testing supplies. It remains concerning that President Trump has blocked Dr. Fauci from testifying before this House committee. This is a bipartisan committee and members on both sides of the aisle deserve a chance to ask Dr. Fauci questions. He has testified in front of bipartisan committees before. There is no doubt that the White House is afraid of what he has to say. Recently, significant funds have been distributed to hospitals and appropriated to improve the nation's testing and diagnostic capabilities. The goal of this hearing is to discuss the best path forward while keeping Americans safe. Science and facts must guide our policy discussion. With no action, 3,000 Americans could die every single day.

Ranking Member Cole said that he joins the Chairman is requesting that Dr. Fauci appear before this panel. The record shows that this particular committee is remarkably bipartisan and has a history of putting political parties aside. Furthermore, it is vital to get the input of public health experts in order to keep Americans alive. The desire to return to normalcy is understandable. However, it is important to remember that getting back to business does not mean getting back to normal. It is unsustainable to keep businesses closed and Americans at home. Any such effort to reopen has to ensure that the health of workers is prioritized. Reopening will require gradual action and constant monitoring. The White House released a well-intentioned blue print to reopen the economy. The problem is that states are not required to follow this plan. It is possible that 50 states have 50 different reopening strategies. It is critically important that the federal government learns from this pandemic and invests in tools to address future health crises.

Testimony

Dr. Frieden said that the bottom line is that COVID-19 is a terrible tragedy. The war against COVID-19 will be long and difficult, but the plan going forward must be constructed strategically. It is true that we will be able to open in a more sustainable way if data is listened to. Once the curve has begun to flatten, there are four key strategies to focus on. These steps include testing widely and strategically, isolating people who test positive, using contact tracing to confidentially warn people, and isolating contacts while connecting them to vital services. If any of these strategies is compromised, the virus will continue to spread. Furthermore, we must find a balance between reopening and letting the virus run amok. We tend to think of this choice as binary, but really, it is not. It is essential to protect healthcare workers and health facilities. These workers and facilities are on the front lines battling against COVID-19. If they become compromised, our nation's response becomes compromised. Vulnerable populations must also be protected. With no action, at least 100,000 elderly people will die in nursing homes. In addition, the government and private sector must work in collaboration to develop a vaccine and ensure that it is cost equitable. It is inevitable that there will be future outbreaks. But it is not inevitable that the US will be so unprepared again. One-time funds are problematic for many agencies and they limit the ability to respond to a crisis such as this. We must change the way we allocate funds. Budget caps should be removed on essential public health agencies. Good public health is good business.

Dr. Rivers said that the United States still experiences about 25,000- 30,000 new cases every day. This range held steady for the entire month of April. Many states are looking ahead to reopening and wondering how to do so safely. Without a robust conversation we risk complacency. There are certain critical capacities that we must shift our focus too. The first is increasing test capacity. Estimates suggest that the US will need 3.5 million tests per week. The second capacity is contact tracing. This is a key approach that will let us reopen safely. Contact tracing is also a key source of data that the US desperately needs. This is not currently being prioritized. The third pillar is improving our healthcare capacity. We have been able to increase our capacity by reducing elective procedures and ramping down our healthcare activities. This should not be necessary going forward. Finally, the nation must invest in disease and infection forecast modeling. There is currently no national standard, and this must change.

Questions and Answers

Chairman DeLauro asked if there is a single state that has met the necessary parameters to ease restrictions. **Dr. Rivers** said that there are four criteria that states should follow when considering reopening. The first is to see the number of new cases decline for two weeks. The second is to have the ability to conduct contact tracing on all new cases. The third is testing everyone with symptoms. The fourth is having the healthcare system capacity to treat all new cases. There are no states that have fulfilled all four criteria. **Dr. Frieden** said there may be some areas within states that are ready to reopen. Additionally, open versus closed is not a simple

on/off switch. **Chairman DeLauro** asked if any state is testing 1% of its population every week. **Dr. Rivers** said no. **Dr. Frieden** said no. **Chairman DeLauro** asked if any states have gotten their transmission rate below one. **Dr. Rivers** said there is evidence that some states may have achieved this. **Chairman DeLauro** asked if the country should be reopening now. **Dr. Rivers** said there is an enormous need to balance public health with the economy. **Dr. Frieden** said we need to do everything within our ability to ramp up our health infrastructure.

Ranking Member Cole asked what accounts should be set outside the normal budget process in order to appropriately respond to a health crisis without worrying about budget limitations. **Dr. Frieden** said that if it is discretionary or mandatory, there will be funding problems. The process should allow for public health professionals to determine what capital is needed in certain health sectors. **Dr. Frieden** requested to add a letter to the record that outlines proposed spending mechanisms related to this. **Ranking Member Cole** asked what we should do to develop an adequate testing and contact tracing program. **Dr. Rivers** said that we should start by identifying gaps in our current infrastructure. Furthermore, we need more research at the federal level to determine what exact approach would work the best. Many experts have different opinions on this. Collaboration is needed to achieve the best result. **Ranking Member Cole** asked if it is true that the nation's testing capacity is limited. **Dr. Rivers** said yes. There should be a unified preparedness program. **Ranking Member Cole** asked how young people and school systems are affected by COVID-19. **Dr. Rivers** said that children are at a low risk for severe illness. However, it is unknown what role children play in transmission.

Rep. Clark asked if testing 1% of the population per week is the right benchmark. **Dr. Rivers** said yes, but we should not test 1% uniformly. 1% is the magnitude that we need, but we need to be measured in how we deliver these tests. **Rep. Clark** asked about the progress made in instant testing. **Dr. Frieden** said there are some systems that are relatively rapid now. However, these tests can only assess a few patients per hour. Investments in these tests need to be made. **Rep. Clark** asked what some of the limiting factors are in developing the necessary testing capacity. **Dr. Rivers** said after doing research, she has not been able to determine a specific limitation. This is certainly a part of the problem. **Rep. Clark** asked what country is doing a good job. **Dr. Rivers** said Singapore is doing a good job and they have a national plan. **Rep. Clark** asked if employer based testing should be implemented. **Dr. Frieden** said yes. This could be a substitute for universal testing. **Rep. Clark** asked how testing should be distributed. **Dr. Rivers** said we should start with contact tracing.

Rep. Harris asked if it is true that there is no data to suggest that stay-at-home orders reduce the spread of COVID-19. **Dr. Frieden** said the data is very clear that stay-at-home orders do reduce the spread of COVID-19. **Rep. Harris** asked if ICU occupancy should be the benchmark as opposed to the number of positive cases since the purpose of the stay-at-home order was to reduce the burden on the healthcare system. **Dr. Rivers** said the purpose of the stay-at-home order was to reduce the burden on the healthcare system but also to provide the nation with time to ramp up its infrastructure. **Rep. Harris** asked how many cases are asymptomatic. **Dr. Rivers** said that evidence suggests that 25-50% of cases are asymptomatic. **Rep. Harris** asked why a business that gets five customers a day and follows the CDC recommended guidelines cannot open for business. **Dr. Rivers** said that the economy as a whole might do worse if consumers are afraid of the spread of disease. **Dr. Harris** asked how many people are asymptomatic for every

confirmed positive test. **Dr. Frieden** said the number tested is a small fraction of the overall cases. **Dr. Harris** asked why outdoor activities such as golfing are prohibited. **Dr. Frieden** said we have to consider the potential that COVID-19 spreads through the environment similar to SARS. **Dr. Harris** asked if antiviral tests will change the disease landscape. **Dr. Frieden** said it is possible.

Rep. Bustos asked how rural and urban areas differ in response to COVID-19. **Dr. Frieden** said that in general, the problems presented in rural areas may be more severe and challenging. Furthermore, we currently need significantly more data in rural areas to understand the true scope of the problem. **Dr. Rivers** said that rural areas have avoided explosive growth but often have limited capacity to deal with any number of cases. **Rep. Bustos** asked what the best practice is for transferring inmates between facilities. **Dr. Frieden** said that the best practice would be to minimize transfers. On top of that, we must ensure that no one who is symptomatic is transferred. We also need a comprehensive approach to broad testing in facilities. **Rep. Bustos** asked what the patient experience is like. **Dr. Frieden** said that many patients do not require hospitalization. However, it may be the incorrect approach to tell individuals to stay home. It is known that COVID-19 reduces the oxygen in the blood. **Rep. Bustos** asked how to address behavioral health moving forward. **Dr. Frieden** said that the interruption of care is concerning. It will be critical to support workers and family members during and after this pandemic. We must look out for PTSD symptoms.

Rep. Herrera Beutler asked how the panelists would rate the nation's production capability. **Dr. Frieden** said that this pandemic has emphasized the connectedness of the world. There are significant technological improvements that can support and enhance our production capabilities. **Rep. Herrera Beutler** asked about the impact of the virus on chronic care communities. **Dr. Rivers** said there are so many secondary impacts of this pandemic. It remains a challenge for individuals with chronic conditions to manage their care during this time. **Rep. Herrera Beutler** asked what recommendations should be made in the maternal health space. **Dr. Rivers** said access to PPE should be a priority. **Rep. Herrera Beutler** asked if reopening of recreational activities can support positive mental health. **Dr. Rivers** said yes. **Dr. Frieden** said yes. It may be necessary to reengineer some of the environment. **Rep. Herrera Beutler** asked how we can support nursing home patients and staff. **Dr. Rivers** said we need to implement universal testing in these facilities.

Rep. Watson Coleman asked if there is any substitution for the development of a vaccine that would take years. **Dr. Frieden** said there is no substitute for a vaccine. The quickest vaccine made in history has taken 4 years. We must recognize that vaccine development is uncertain. Thus we need to do everything possible to supplement a potential vaccine. **Rep. Watson Coleman** asked what circumstances lead to asymptomatic individuals being tested. **Dr. Frieden** said that an outbreak in a community or facility will prompt large scale testing. **Dr. Rivers** said that testing asymptomatic individuals is not a top priority of the CDC right now. **Rep. Watson Coleman** asked what it would take to get to universal testing. **Dr. Rivers** said that it is not clear if universal testing is possible. Contact tracing would help to bridge the gap. **Rep. Watson Coleman** asked what the true impact is of withholding funding to the WHO. **Dr. Frieden** said that we need to support the WHO and make it stronger. **Dr. Rivers** said the WHO is vital in

responding to world health challenges. **Rep. Watson Coleman** asked if it is a good idea to dismantle the COVID-19 task force. **Dr. Frieden** said it is dependent on what comes next.

Questions Submitted by Members Not Present

Rep. Pocan asked if the federal government should play a role in addressing testing and contact tracing needs. **Dr. Rivers** said yes. States should not have to compete against each other. **Rep. Pocan** asked if the CDC guidelines on who should be prioritized are accurate. **Dr. Rivers** said that the CDC guidelines are appropriate.

Rep. Roybal-Allard asked if it is problematic that the COVID-19 task force only contained one member from the CDC. **Dr. Frieden** said yes. There should be detailed input from experts at the CDC. **Rep. Roybal-Allard** asked if the CDC should mandate the use of facemasks in public. **Dr. Frieden** said that the CDC does not have the authority to mandate.

Rep. Frankel asked what the benchmark for testing should be. **Dr. Rivers** said 3.5 million per week. **Rep. Frankel** asked if the capacity to provide these tests currently exists. **Dr. Rivers** said no. **Rep. Frankel** asked what will need to be done to get there. **Dr. Rivers** said that the steps are not clear. **Rep. Frankel** asked if there was anything else that could have been done to limit the spread. **Dr. Rivers** said yes but we should be forward looking instead.