



U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education Labor & Pensions
Examining Our COVID-19 Response: An Update from the Frontlines

Tuesday, March 9, 2021

10:00am, 106 Dirksen Senate Office Building

Purpose

The purpose of the hearing is to discuss the country's response to COVID-19 through a public health infrastructure lens to find out what has worked, what hasn't worked, and how to prepare for the next public health emergency.

Members Present

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Burr, Senators Casey, Cassidy, Baldwin, Collins, Kane, Murkowski, Hassan, Marshall, Hickenlooper, Tuberville, Rosen.

Witnesses

Jerry P. Abraham, MD, MPH, CMQ, Director, Kedren Health Vaccines

Umair A. Shah, MD, MPH, Secretary of Health, State of Washington

Ashish K. Jha, MD, MPH, Dean, Brown University School of Public Health

Mary Ann Fuchs, DNP, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN, Vice President Of Patient Care & System Chief Nurse Executive, Duke University Health System

Opening Statements

Chairman Smith (D-WA) said the country has had to deal with over 29 million people being infected with COVID-19, and over half a million have died from the virus. The country must take active steps to rebuild stronger and fairer. Passing the historic American Rescue Plan will help the country respond to the virus in an equitable manner and engage with trusted partners to help vulnerable communities. Additionally, the act provides a significant amount of funding to strengthen the nation's public health workforce. One issue the country must focus on is vaccine hesitancy. Despite the country having skilled experts that are furthering vaccine confidence, there is still mistrust against the vaccine, which showcases that leadership needs to further engage community leaders to encourage vulnerable communities to get vaccinated. The Pacific Islander community's lack of access to vaccinations in Washington State is an example of how communities of color aren't being equitably supported. This pandemic will not be over for anyone until it is over for everyone. That's why the reintroduction of the Public Health Infrastructure Saves Lives Act is so important. The country as a whole wants to reach the end of this pandemic but in order to do so, and to be able to strengthen the current infrastructure to respond to the pandemics of the future, there needs to be strong collaboration efforts amongst leadership.

Ranking Burr (R-NC) said since the beginning of the pandemic a little over a year today, millions have been infected by COVID-19 while hundreds of thousands have died. The Senate HELP committee has an awesome responsibility to define what has worked in the country's

response to the pandemic, what hasn't, and what needs to be done in the future. It is admirable the speed at which vaccines and therapeutics have been created all the while maintaining a gold standard of safety. This effort was a result of Operation Warp Speed, which supported the coordination between so many of the nation's institutions to disburse supplies and to manufacturer safe and effective treatments. The recent partisan relief bill allocates only 5% for public health while allocating the rest for vaccine development. While this is important, there needs to be action today to support the country's public health infrastructure. Though it is important to recognize the successes of the country's response against COVID-19, it is equally imperative to recognize the failures. For example, only 17% of schools have returned to in person learning and 100,000 restaurants will never reopen their doors. To meet the current administration's goal of administering 100 million doses in 100 days, Congress needs to put greater effort into the push for greater vaccine uptake. As this is the first hearing on COVID-19 this congress, the committee should set the expectation to hear from administration officials on a regular basis-more frequently than they did with the prior administration.

Testimony

Dr. Umair A. Shah said the country needs to stay the course to use every tool attainable to end the pandemic. 5,000 Washingtonians have lost their lives while there is mounting frustration in watching the growing strain on the country's public health system. While utilizing the tools readily available in the country's public health infrastructure to end this pandemic, the country requires additional public health funding. Additionally, the country should be focusing on increasing vaccine distribution efforts and safely reopening schools and restaurants. However, it is important that the country does not let down its guard or the number of COVID-19 cases will rise. The nation is standing on a three legged stool held up by vaccine supply, logistics and operations, and vaccine demand. While the current issue is in regards to supply, it is important for leadership to consider vaccine demand in the long term and how to address issues that may come up in the future. Additionally, the pandemic has shown the shortcomings of the nation's current public health system. As such, the country must fund a system that is ready to respond to everything. Public health is the invisible offensive football line while the country has been focusing on the quarter back for far too long.

Dr. Ashish K. Jha said if the country stayed at its current vaccination rate, it will take 3 to 4 years to reach herd immunity. Because of this, leadership needs to act now to produce a strategy that has greater funding opportunities to increase the speed of vaccine development. Additionally Leadership should encourage the disbursement of cheap and easy to administer tests that can be used at home, as testing will continue to stay as an important part in responding to this virus. With the growing vaccinated numbers, it is important to remember that even with strong vaccines and testing efforts, some people will continue to be infected by the virus. As such, outpatient treatments to respond to COVID-19 need to be bolstered and ramped up. Congress needs to work with NIH to ramp up outpatient treatments to ease the severity of the virus's impact in individuals' bodies. Lastly, equity needs to be at the heart of the mission to end the pandemic. As the world enters an era of pandemics due to population growth and climate change, the country needs strengthen its available our tools to end today's pandemic and prevent the next one.

Dr. Jerry Abraham said Black and Latinx individuals are dying from COVID-19 at twice the rate of other racial groups. Those living in poor communities experience lack of access to health care, they are less likely to use public transportation, less likely to seek out mental health services, have difficulties with language, lack of insurance or are underinsured, and have high rates of chronic diseases. A whole wrath of health disparities result in health outcomes that are different across the economic spectrum. Public health clinics as well as state and local public health departments need more resources to make sure they can adequately and fairly respond to meet the needs of the most vulnerable communities. The country can achieve the goal of 100 million vaccines and 100 days and be able to return to being with our loved ones through additional funding mechanisms and support for the public health workforce.

Mary Ann Fuchs said as COVID-19 has persisted, it has been important to be able to stay flexible to meet patients' needs, no matter the changing circumstances. By holding town halls and virtual meetings for the community and setting up both makeshift testing and vaccine centers, the efforts conducted by the Duke University Health System have been able to support the community to the best of its ability. In moving forward, there needs to be additional focus on providing adequate and effective personal protective equipment (PPE) to the health care workforce, and the mental wellbeing of the workforce needs to be supported to prevent burnout. Ms. Fuchs said some solutions to the health care workforce issue could be increased funding to Title 8 nursing development programs and increased support of the Future Advancement of Academic Nursing Act. In addition to furthering an equitable approach to the vaccine, significant efforts should also be provided to ensure that telehealth services are strengthened for the future.

Questions and Answers

Chairman Smith asked what Washington State has been doing to make sure testing and vaccines are accessible to everyone. **Dr. Shah** said efforts started back in the fall with curating events with communities to measure their response to the coming vaccines. Additionally, the state is engaged with continued conversations with community leaders and stakeholders to ensure equitable vaccine distribution efforts are going on. **Chairman Smith** asked how to ensure vaccines are reaching communities of color. **Dr. Abraham** said the country's public health infrastructure needed to be built yesterday however, there are strong networks already existing within vulnerable communities. Both local government and public health departments need to work lock and step with these already existing networks.

Ranking Member Burr asked if state and local officials should be the leading voices for their communities. **Dr. Shah** said absolutely, state and local officials should be the leading voices for their communities while federal leadership should take a leading role in the area of resources which local and state structures do not have. **Ranking Member Burr** asked what the strength of the country's surveillance system currently is and how to strengthen it for the future. **Dr. Jha** said there was original thought that the country would have a robust response to COVID-19, because its surveillance systems are strong. However, the surveillance systems proved to be inapplicable in the community setting, especially where current data analysis is weak. The data the country has been using have come from journalists, not the government. **Ranking Member Burr** asked how the private sector could be better utilized. **Dr. Jha** said genome services are strong in the private sector.

Sen. Casey (D-PA) asked if it is possible to be prepared for public health emergency without investing in public health infrastructure. **Dr. Shah** said it is extremely difficult to throw money at an issue while it is occurring. **Sen. Casey** asked which investments would be most successful while not in a public health emergency to prepare for an emergency in the future. **Dr. Shah** said public health systems are fatigued physically and emotionally, so a smart investment would be to strengthen the public health workforce while also an enhancing technological advances in the sector. Additionally, there needs to be clearer communication practices within communities so it can be understood that those working in the public health workforce are a solution, not a problem. **Sen. Casey** asked once we get to the immunization of children and teens, what is the process of safety and efficacy of vaccines to children and teens. **Dr. Jha** said while the disease has a milder effect on most kids, there are kids with chronic diseases that are very vulnerable to the virus. Data should be available from mid to late summer for pediatrician vaccine trials. There are concerns that it will take a long time for people to get comfortable with vaccinating kids.

Sen. Cassidy (R-LA) asked if there is direct evidence that suggests obesity is a COVID-19 risk factor. **Dr. Jha** said data is still coming out about the connection between obesity and COVID-19, but it is safe to say it is an important risk factor. **Sen. Cassidy** asked if there is definitive data on infection rates within communities of color, since it is found individuals within these communities frequently avoid getting tested. **Dr. Jha** said no. **Sen. Cassidy** asked if surrogate measures can be used to measure vaccine efficacy in children. **Dr. Jha** said the science is evolving and getting better. As infection numbers get very low in the summer, there should be more confidence about the vaccines efficacy. **Sen. Cassidy** asked if schools should reopen. **Dr. Jha** said schools should reopen as long as there is adequate personal protective equipment for teachers and students alike. Additionally, more vaccines should be allocated for teachers. **Sen. Cassidy** said he agreed and that is why the legislation A Bill to Address Behavioral Health and Well-Being Among Health Care Professionals is so important.

Sen. Baldwin (D-WI) asked what states can do to respond to new variants and how can scaling up surveillance and genomic sequencing makes the country more prepared now and in the future. **Dr. Shah** said the country needs to stay the course, utilizing masks, maintaining social distancing, and being cautious with reopening. There needs to be a stronger strategy to support genomic sequencing. **Sen. Baldwin** asked what percent of positive COVID-19 tests should receive genomic sequencing. **Dr. Shah** said in the United Kingdom they are between a 5-7% rate, but there needs to be further action to continue to learn about what the optimal percentage is for this country. However, it is not necessarily imperative to focus on optimal percentage but more important for strong surveillance efforts to be scaled across the country. **Sen. Baldwin** asked what more needs to be done to help community health centers. **Dr. Abraham** said community health centers need to work with public-private partnerships throughout the country to support vulnerable communities. Communities need more vaccines, more hands, and more resources.

Se. Collins (R-ME) asked what can be done to expedite reopening of schools. **Dr. Jha** said the continued closure of schools has had a significant impact on the labor market for women, since they are the predominant caretakers of children. The country has set up a false dichotomy between teachers' safety and children's wellbeing, but both need to be supported. There are a

few principals that should be in place ahead of opening: universal masking in schools with 90% adherence, strong ventilation, testing, and vaccination for all school staff, not just teachers.

Sen. Kaine (D-VA) asked what the committee should focus on to lower the turnover rate among the healthcare workforce. **Dr. Fuchs** said there need to be studies observing the impacts of the pandemic on the workforce to look at different strategies at supporting the workforce. **Sen. Kaine** asked what Congress should be thinking about for the care of the nation's health in the future. **Dr. Jha** said there is a huge amount of people who have substantial chronic debilitating issues from contracting COVID-19, so the conversation needs to turn away from exclusively focusing on mortality rates. As such, there needs to be more research on the virus's impact on the body in the long term. When the President declares that the public health emergency is over, the nation will have to manage how to assist a population of people with serious lasting health issues from the virus.

Sen. Murkowski (R-AK) asked if the witnesses are familiar with the guidelines of how to address mental and behavioral issues defined in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) report. **Dr. Abraham** said winning against COVID-19 has to do with strengthening the country's mental health resources. **Dr. Shah** said there is a big concern from the patient perspective about a growing mental health crisis. Studies found before the pandemic 1 out of 10 adults in the country had anxiety, while that number has now grown to 4 out of 10. There is additional concern that first responders haven't been given the opportunity to cope with their own burdens, which may have an effect on the public health workforce at large.

Sen. Hassan (D-NH) asked what steps should be taken to protect long term care facilities. **Dr. Shah** said the importance of vaccinating seniors, especially those in facilities, cannot be forgotten. Their needs include additional personal protective equipment and increased space availabilities for patients to be able to get out and quarantine away from others. Additionally, it is important to consider the impact on seniors' mental health during this time as they are away from their loved ones. **Sen. Hassan** asked what steps can be taken to improve vaccine availability across all types of care settings including those that can't travel to vaccine sites and also home health workers. **Dr. Jha** said it's important to think about the work structure of those who are home health workers, so there can be a deeper understanding of the context as to why people are not taking the vaccine. These working conditions are restrictive and that's why mobile clinics are so important.

Sen. Marshall (R-KS) asked if it would be more significant for 200 people to receive the first shot rather than 100 people to receive both shots. **Dr. Abraham** said yes. [Video blacked out and will not replay for this section.]

Sen. Hickenlooper (D-CO) asked what the timeline for small businesses to be able to reopen is. **Dr. Shah** said vaccines are the sliver of hope to reopen businesses. Increases in vaccine rates means decreases in transmissions rates but public health measures cannot go away. **Dr. Abraham** said it's critical to get vaccines to people where they live and work. Small businesses have to deal with the barrier of low levels of scheduling flexibility. This is precisely where mobile clinics are powerful. **Sen. Hickenlooper** asked how to get people to trust the vaccine. **Dr.**

Abraham said leaders must meet with community members where they are, noting that there is a difference between a lack of access to the vaccine and vaccine hesitancy.

Sen. Tuberville (R-AL) asked how to support the public health workforce. **Dr. Abraham** said there aren't enough health care workers in the communities, so the workforce needs to be built up. **Dr. Jha** said leadership needs to make sure the country isn't attacking frontline workers for being honest, noting that many workers were accused of lying about case volume in the beginning of the pandemic. Additionally, Congress needs to find new ways to pay doctors, nurses, and health care providers. **Dr. Shah** said there is a need to invest in the public health workforce both for additional training and support for workforce mental health. **Dr. Fuchs** said there needs to be funding for flexible services to meet individual needs. **Sen. Tuberville** said there is a need for an advertisement campaign starting now to encourage people to take the vaccine.

Sen. Rosen (D-NV) asked what needs to be done to get the vaccine to the most vulnerable communities and to strengthen public health infrastructure. **Dr. Jha** said keeping things simple is the most important thing to focus on. Additionally, public health leaders need to be present in the communities, especially in rural communities. The problem is that the country is trying to recreate a public health system that has been hollowed out for the last decade. **Dr. Abraham** said the digital divide is also a huge barrier to vaccine access so efforts to ease these burdens need to be addressed. **Sen. Rosen** asked how to improve access to COVID-19 therapeutics. **Dr. Jha** said Congress should push for additional funding and continued support. **Dr. Shah** said rural health systems need more support as they face challenges that are very different than urban areas. **Dr. Fuchs** said different models of care delivery are also notable.

Ranking member Burr asked if there are other points of data that should be supported to better understand COVID-19. **Dr. Jha** said there are large amounts of data that remains unaffiliated with public health directly that can be incorporated into public health modeling. Sources include google mobility data and restaurant reservation data. **Ranking member Burr** said the country has the data to know how to reopen schools, how to vaccinate vulnerable communities, and how to vaccinate younger populations. The country needs to act based on facts and science.

Chairman Murray asked what the biggest challenges against strengthening tracking efforts and responding to variants are. **Dr. Jha** said there is no reason why the United Kingdom is the standalone leader studying variants. The country needs a robust surveillance system. **Sen. Murray** asked how providers are managing other primary care needs during the pandemic. **Dr. Abraham** said it hasn't been easy.

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