



HOUSE SELECT SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

Hybrid Hearing on “Reaching the Light at the End of the Tunnel: A Science-Driven Approach to Swiftly and Safely Ending the Pandemic”

Thursday, April 15, 2021 at 10:30 a.m. via Cisco WebEx

PURPOSE

The purpose of this hearing is to discuss the current state of the nation’s response to COVID-19. The hearing discussed the current state of the nation’s response to COVID-19, including plans for reopening schools, equitably distributing vaccines and combatting novel variants. A summary of the hearing is attached.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Increasing the number of vaccinated individuals and decreasing vaccine hesitancy remains the top priority to combat COVID-19.
- There was a consensus among witnesses that the rollout of vaccines has been successful thus far, but efforts to increase the country’s equitable disbursement of vaccines to communities of color needs to be prioritized.
- With the increasing volume of migrants at the southern border, there are growing concerns regarding health standards at Customs and Border Protection holding facilities and what happens in the aftermath of release from these facilities.
- Reopening schools and the impact of school closure on children remains a concern, as does the emergence and growing dominance of SARS-CoV-2 variants, which are currently being studied as plans for potential booster vaccines are considered.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Chairman Clyburn, Ranking Member Scalise, Representatives Water, Jordan, Maloney, Green, Velazquez, Miller-Meeks, Foster, Malliotakis, Raskin, and Krishnamoorthi.

WITNESSES

Anthony S. Fauci, M.D.

Director
National Institute of Allergy and
Infectious Diseases, National Institute of
Health

Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention

David Kessler, M.D.

Chief Science Officer, COVID Response
Department of Health and Human
Services

Rochelle P. Walensky, M.D., M.P.H.

Director

OPENING STATEMENTS

Chairman Clyburn (D-SC) stated that America has experienced COVID-19 hardships more than any other country. Since Biden, there has been a massive increase in the pace of vaccinations, while there has been more vaccinations this week than in the first six weeks of the rollout. Four days from now, all adults across the nation will be eligible to receive a vaccine. Efforts must continue to respond to the highly contagious COVID-19 variants. Hospitals have begun to see more patients in the 20's, 30's, and 40's arrive after being infected by these new variants. Today's experts will inform us how a science driven approach will allow the country to get back to a sense of normal in the safest way.

Ranking Member Scalise (R-LA) said that America is now starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel. With Operation Warp Speed, America has been leading the way in the name of innovation, especially through the creation of vaccines. Now, many people are receiving the vaccine at high rates. But vaccinated people are beginning to question why they cannot return to normal life. There is still a lot to learn about this virus, but research is showing that severe lockdowns did not work and has had devastating effects on children across the country. There have also been issues related to freedom of speech, such as YouTube taking down a video last week of a roundtable with Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and doctors, citing Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance as justification for shutting down the stream. Further, the issue at the border continues to grow as a large public health issue where cells that are not supposed to have more than 10 individuals at a time now have 400 children in them. These facilities are citing a 10% COVID-19 positivity rate. The government is allowing this situation at the same time it is not allowing students to return to schools. More needs to be done.

TESTIMONY

Dr. Fauci said that just last Friday, the [Story Behind COVID-19 Vaccines](#) was published, which stated that the speed at which these vaccines were developed was due to an extraordinary collaboration that has been underway for decades before COVID-19 emerged. Through the NIH and its grantees, private entities were able to use their resources with the nation's public research. As such, the production of these vaccines has reflected the strength of this country's innovation. The vaccines are incredibly durable and the rollout to Americans has been very successful. Now, the concern is the growth of variants in the country. However, with regard to the dominant variant in the country, the vaccines have been found to successfully respond to it.

Dr. Walensky said every loss of life is felt by grieving communities and families in this pandemic. With the adverse events reported in six people after receiving the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, the CDC has paused the vaccine and has been transparent with the

country as to what is going on. COVID-19 has highlighted the longstanding disparities experienced by communities in this country. This week, the CDC announced that racism is a public health issue and is focused on expanding the equitable disbursement of vaccines and increasing diversity in the health care workforce. COVID-19 is not the country's first emergency; since 2009, there have been six public health threats. While each were significant, none equated to consistent funding. If consistent funding is not prioritized, the country will face another emergency like the one today. The CDC is leading with science and continues to be a resource. The agency is expanding the reach of life-saving COVID-19 vaccines and stresses that health equity must be at the intersection of public health. Congress must work to fund a strong public health infrastructure to respond to the threats ahead.

Dr. Kessler stated that 194 million vaccines have been administered and over 79% of those who are 65 have received at least one dose. The country has already delivered 250 million doses and have enrolled about 142,000 providers to administer the vaccines. Nothing should detract from the fact that America's need to get vaccinated. Vaccinations are available today that meet the safety and quality standards required. The government needs to confront the reality of vaccine hesitancy, and the best way to do that is by being transparent about the safety of the products. Vaccines have an excellent safety profile. In progressing to the future, there are three critical initiatives that should be understood. First, there is a need to evaluate data on the safety and effectiveness of vaccines for children. Second, there is a need to address questions about variants even though the current vaccines are proving effective. Finally, planning is underway for the possible need of booster shots in the future.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Chairman Clyburn asked if children can go back to school if vaccinations continue at the speed they are going. **Dr. Kessler** said that the main goal is to get as many people vaccinated as possible. **Chairman Clyburn** asked what the impact is of the report recently released from the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Oxford. **Dr. Fauci** said the report was studying the complications from multiple vaccines, including those for COVID-19. When the paper gets submitted to the classical scientific journals, some of the report's procedural gaps will be cleared out. **Chairman Clyburn** asked if mask mandates have helped save lives. **Dr. Fauci** said yes. **Dr. Walensky** said yes. **Dr. Kessler** said yes.

Ranking Member Scalise (R-LA) asked if the CDC guidance requiring a COVID-19 test to re-enter the country applies to anyone. **Dr. Walensky** said that it is air-travel guidance. **Ranking Member Scalise** asked if it is against the law for individuals to enter the country without a COVID-19 test. **Dr. Walensky** said that it is guidance, not law. **Ranking Member Scalise** asked if those in detention camps look like they are following social distancing guidance. **Dr. Fauci** said no. **Ranking Member Scalise** asked if safely reopening schools does not equate to vaccinating teachers. **Dr. Walensky** said vaccinations are important but schools can still open. **Dr. Fauci** said he agrees.

Ranking Member Scalise asked if scientific protocol should drive reopening schools. **Dr. Fauci** said yes. **Ranking Member Scalise** asked if closing schools had a negative impact on children. **Dr. Fauci** said it is known that school closure is negative for children. **Ranking Member Scalise** asked whether a restaurant would be shut down if it is intended to have a capacity for 200, but actually has 4,000 people like some detention centers. **Dr. Fauci** said it would be a concern.

Rep. Waters (D-CA) asked why racism is a public health threat. **Dr. Walensky** said that when working in medicine, you see individuals who are racially diverse and witness why individuals have lack of access to care. **Rep. Waters** asked if it would be fair to say the country would not be able to get over the pandemic if people of the color are not able access the vaccine. **Dr. Fauci** said no, everyone needs equal access to vaccines. **Rep. Waters** asked what can be expected for the long-haulers. **Dr. Fauci** said those who previously had COVID-19 and now have long-term symptoms are currently being studied to see if there are patterns between these long-haulers. **Rep. Waters** asked if there would be different booster shots for the different variants. **Dr. Fauci** said if the country gets more and more variants, it is a moving target and that is why there is a goal to create a universal vaccine. In the meantime, there are efforts to create boosters for the most contagious variant. **Rep. Waters** asked how Congress can be safer. **Dr. Fauci** said all members of Congress should be encouraged to be vaccinated and the environment of Congress should encourage social distancing.

Rep. Jordan (R-OH) asked when the country can stop wearing masks. **Dr. Fauci** said when the virus is no longer a threat. The recommendations are not personal recommendations. Rather, they are based on the CDC guidance. **Rep. Jordan** asked when Americans can get their civil liberties back. **Dr. Fauci** said the conversation is not about liberties, but about the high daily infection rates and high death rates. **Rep. Jordan** asked if there is a number of infections that would mean Americans can return to normal. **Dr. Fauci** said when infection rates are lower and when people are vaccinated more and more, then the country can return to normal.

Rep. Maloney (D-NY) asked if the virus will get worse. **Dr. Fauci** said the country is at a crossroads. We are doing well in regards to the roll out of vaccines, but there are many states that are seeing rising numbers, which showcases why vaccines are important. **Rep. Maloney** asked when the designation of a pandemic can be changed or no longer considered a pandemic. **Dr. Fauci** said there are multiple definitions of a pandemic. Generally, a pandemic is when a disease spreads across borders, so likely when many countries are free of it. He stressed the practice of restrictions to reduce communication of disease until vaccination levels are sufficient to get to this place.

Rep. Green (R-TN) said the Biden Administration is failing across the board; with vaccines, with lockdowns, with the border and with drugs. **Rep. Green** asked if the halt of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine has increased vaccine hesitancy. **Dr. Fauci** said the

CDC and the FDA made a determination when they saw the accumulation of six adverse events to pause the vaccine.

Rep. Velazquez (D-NY) asked what the current Administration is doing that the last Administration was not. **Dr. Fauci** said support of community health centers, federally qualified health centers and community pharmacies to meet the needs to vulnerable communities has been a successful strategy of this Administration. **Dr. Walensky** said that while efforts so far have been successful, so much more needs to be done to meet the needs of communities of color. **Rep. Velazquez** asked what is being done to respond to new variants. **Dr. Kessler** said there are studies being conducted to measure the effectiveness and efficacy of the current vaccines against the variants. Additionally, there are current steps to create a new generation of vaccines to respond to the variants better. **Rep. Velazquez** asked if boosters will be needed in the near future. **Dr. Kessler** said it is unknown right now but for planning purposes, boosters should be expected.

Rep. Miller-Meeks (R-IA) asked what level of the vaccination is required to achieve herd immunity. **Dr. Kessler** said no one knows. **Dr. Fauci** said herd immunity for measles is 90 percent, but calculating herd immunity comes from a number of things. **Dr. Walensky** said it is changing given the variants. **Rep. Miller-Meeks** asked if the FDA can use real world evidence to increase the duration of the first and second dose of the vaccines. **Dr. Kessler** said it is complicated. **Dr. Fauci** said it is complicated. **Dr. Walensky** said it is complicated. **Rep. Miller-Meeks** asked if all migrants should be tested before entering the country. **Dr. Fauci** said that is desired. **Rep. Miller-Meeks** asked if tests are required. **Dr. Walensky** said yes, if they are traveling by air. **Rep. Miller-Meeks** asked if migrants should be tested at the border. **Dr. Walensky** said there are efforts to test and get as many vaccines to the border as possible. **Rep. Miller-Meeks** asked how many excess non-COVID-19 deaths have occurred this year. **Dr. Walensky** said 500,000 total excess deaths have been measured with at least 75% directly attributable to COVID-19, according to a Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report ([MMWR](#)) released today. **Rep. Miller-Meeks** asked if pregnancy puts individuals at a higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19. **Dr. Walensky** said yes. **Rep. Miller-Meeks** asked if the Vice President's comments in regards to not taking a vaccine from the Trump Administration increased vaccine hesitancy. **Dr. Walensky** said it is everyone's responsibility to get vaccinated.

Rep. Foster (D-IL) asked if there is a current plan to acquire boosters. **Dr. Kessler** said the government is currently in the process of securing boosters. **Rep. Foster** asked what the plan is to ensure therapeutics are getting to patients that really need them. **Dr. Kessler** said that there are efforts to increase therapeutics but the country needs better options. **Rep. Foster** asked if data is being collected regarding breakthrough cases. **Dr. Walensky** said the CDC is partnering with academic institutions to collect data. **Rep. Foster** asked what the timelines for booster shots are. **Dr. Fauci** said there are a couple of approaches to the evolution of variants, one being to create a booster against

the wild-type variant. The other approach is to make a booster that is directly targeted at a specific variant. The goal is to get a universal SARS-CoV-2 vaccine. **Rep. Foster** asked if alternative approaches to vaccine dosages are being considered. **Dr. Fauci** said when doing an age de-escalation, there will be a dose de-escalation. **Dr. Kessler** said getting the dose right in children is essential.

Rep. Malliotakis (R-NY) if keeping the southern border open but the northern border closed is inconsistent. **Dr. Fauci** said that while he is not an expert on border controls, the situation at the southern border is far different than the northern border. **Rep. Malliotakis** asked how these inconsistencies can exist when schools are still closed. **Dr. Walensky** said the guidance recently released from the CDC focused on opening schools. **Rep. Malliotakis** asked what can be done to get local communities to open schools. **Dr. Walensky** said the CDC has been working with multiple stakeholders and has definitely said that schools should be the first to open and the last to close. However, most of the youth cases are occurring on the sports field.

Rep. Raskin (D-MD) asked if deliberately exposing Americans to the virus is effective. **Dr. Fauci** said the best way to protect Americans is to get them vaccinated as quickly as possible. **Rep. Raskin** asked if a political herd mentality trying to overrun scientific herd immunity is a problem. **Dr. Kessler** said the greatest risk right now is the issue of vaccine hesitancy. **Rep. Raskin** asked if it would be a positive message for citizens if 100 percent of Congress was vaccinated. **Dr. Fauci** said yes. **Rep. Raskin** asked if it is a danger to public health for political appointees to dictate CDC policies. **Dr. Walensky** said the CDC is guided by science only. **Rep. Raskin** asked if the insurrection at the Capitol was a super spreader event. **Dr. Fauci** said any group that is not wearing masks is a concern. **Rep. Raskin** asked if there is a problem when people place their ideologies ahead of science. **Dr. Kessler** said the deaths are rising again but if the country wants to return back to normal, every American needs to be vaccinated.

Rep. Krishnamoorthi (D-IL) asked if individuals who have been vaccinated still have to wear a mask. **Dr. Fauci** said the trials for the vaccine were to prevent a clinically identifiable disease. Transmission can still occur for those who have been vaccinated. **Rep. Krishnamoorthi** asked what was meant when Dr. Fauci said the numbers of South Dakota do not lie. **Dr. Fauci** said that the case number in South Dakota with respect to the total population of the state is very high. **Rep. Krishnamoorthi** asked if it is fair to say the events that have happened in Minnesota were related to COVID-19 deaths elsewhere. **Dr. Walensky** said there were many concerns regarding the events in South Dakota. **Rep. Krishnamoorthi** asked if it is appropriate for Big Tech to take down anti-vaccine posts such as Tucker Carlson's recent post. **Dr. Kessler** said vaccines work and any comment saying they do not work is false. **Dr. Fauci** said he is not an expert as to what should be taken down from Facebook but the comments are disagreeable. **Rep. Krishnamoorthi** asked if vaccines will be available at the same time all age groups are eligible. **Dr. Kessler** said vaccine availability will be different across the nation but the most important thing that can be done right now is to rely on trusted messengers.