



House Energy and Commerce Committee, Subcommittee on Health
No Time to Lose: Solutions to Increase COVID-19 Vaccinations in the States
February 2, 2021
11:00 A.M., Virtual Hearing via Cisco WebEx

Purpose

The purpose of this hearing is to consider solutions to increase COVID-19 vaccination distribution amongst states, and to hear from witnesses from 5 states on how these solutions can be achieved to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

Members Present

Chairwoman DeGette, Ranking Member of the Subcommittee Griffith, Ranking member of the Full Committee Rodgers, Representatives Pallone, Tonko, Ruiz, Dingell, Kuster, Soto, O'Halleran, Rice, Schrier, Trahan, Burgess, McKinley, Walberg, Palmer, Dunn, and Joyce

Witnesses

Ms. Ngozi Ezike, MD, Director, Illinois Department of Public Health

Ms. Joneigh S. Khaldun, MD, MPH, FACEP, Chief Medical Executive and Chief Deputy Director, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services

Mr. Clay Marsh, MD, COVID-19/Coronavirus Czar, West Virginia

Ms. Courtney N. Phillips, PhD, Secretary, Louisiana Department of Health

Ms. Jill Hunsaker Ryan, MPH, Executive Director, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

Opening Statements

Chairwoman DeGette said that given the COVID-19 devastations, there is no time to lose and all must act with a sense of urgency at all levels of government to return to normal. The current administration recently announced a comprehensive strategy to mount a successful vaccination program, establish trust, and provide emergency relief that Americans desperately need. They will continue to engage with the administration to tackle the rollout of COVID vaccines. The first step of Operation Warp Speed was to test the safety and efficacy of vaccines. Now, they must ensure Americans get vaccinated quickly. States are mobilizing to expand to figure out who receives the vaccine next and how vulnerable populations can be prioritized. There is a lot of confusion and frustration, particularly around the lack of transparency of vaccines coming in. The majority of Americans want the vaccine, but some have reservations. The Biden Administration has committed to transparent data to build trust with communities.

Ranking Member of the Subcommittee Griffith said ending the pandemic hinges on the vaccine distribution efforts. This not only means sending vaccines to states, but also getting vaccines into arms. 62% of the vaccine supply has been administered and has been trending upwards. Operation Warp Speed was launched to accelerate the roll out of vaccines. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended priority groups for vaccines, including long-term care facilities and healthcare personnel. States incorporated these recommendations and the federal government worked to administer these to the states. States are under criticism for how their vaccination campaigns have been responding to the lack of shots. Lack of trained personnel, miscommunication on number of dose availability, and other challenges pose as logistical obstacles. A successful model of a state can be used as a model for other states.

Rep. Pallone said that thousands of Americans continue to die and COVID-19 variants are emerging. Stakes are high and vaccines are more important than ever. The Biden Administration is taking steps to increase vaccine rollouts. They must focus on the most vulnerable populations and improving equity during the vaccine rollout. There are currently two vaccines that are authorized by the FDA. The prior administration had no national strategy, but the Biden Administration now has a national strategy. This will require substantial support by Congress. Congress must pass the Rescue Plan, the new COVID bill, which would invest an additional \$20 billion to the COVID-19 pandemic. This would provide funds to assist states in their vaccination efforts.

Ranking member of the Full Committee Rodgers said Operation Warp Speed set ambitious goals that have been achieved through this vaccine process. They must vaccinate as many Americans as possible to get normal lives back. They must continue to act with a sense of urgency. This is an extremely complex system that involves all states and territories, which may be one of the largest and most complex logistical operations ever in the US. They must look at the assets and resources already in place that would be part of the solution. This will be an all-government approach through bipartisanship in order to be prepared for future pandemics.

Testimony

Ms. Ezike said that through efficient distribution of the vaccines, masking, and hand hygiene can surpass the spread of the virus. They continue to establish a statewide network in Illinois. Limited supply and inconsistent messages have posed as challenges for vaccine distribution, which left the state receiving fewer vaccine doses. The previous administration changed the priority groups, which confused the state. The Illinois National Guard was activated to help with vaccine distribution, but they continue to need assistance. While they await more vaccine supply, actions may support non-pharmaceutical approaches such as genomic screening for new variants and continuation of paid sick leave, especially for vulnerable populations. They need an increased supply of vaccines and resources, as well as improved communication channels. The federal government should provide states with updates to the system so states can work efficiently.

Ms. Khaldun said that efficient and equitable vaccine distribution is important. As a practicing physician, she has seen the terrible impact on patients, families, and colleagues the pandemic has had. Michigan is working hard to distribute the vaccines across the state. The biggest challenge has been the limited supply of vaccines, lack of predictability, and lack of a national strategy until now. Michigan has made progress by being intentional and focused. They are also focused on

equity, vowing to have no disparities between population groups. COVID-19 has disproportionately affected communities of color, which have been caused by systemic issues. Michigan is currently engaging trusted community members, using data, and developing strategic plans to prioritize socially vulnerable groups, mobilize groups of vaccinators to go into communities, and address mistrust. They need additional funding to address barriers to access. Providers are overburdened by the tracking system, which has led to inaccuracies. Improvements in data reporting would ease the burden on states and allow them to focus on vaccine distribution.

Mr. Marsh said that in West Virginia, they recognize that it is culture that plays the most important role. Working collaboratively is important to deliver services in the state. They created a teams-by-teams approach, choosing the most expert people to lead the response. As they clarified priorities, they focused on older patients who are the most vulnerable to hospitalization, with large percentages of death being in this population. They also focused on vulnerable populations. They started a pre-registration system to avoid confusion for vaccination. The only way they are going to succeed is together.

Ms. Phillips said they work with partners to get people enrolled and receive vaccinations. A top priority has been equitable coverage, and they are determined to getting more vaccinations for vulnerable populations. They've allocated more than 90% of doses received. Provider sites are being increased every week and the state has been testing distribution models for when more vaccines are available. They recognize that there are areas that are provider deserts, and have deployed teams to these areas for vaccine distribution in Louisiana. Providing advanced notice would provide more time for the state to plan distribution. States need more visibility for more efficient planning and staffing needs. Continued flexibility in long-term partnerships with CVS and Walgreens will allow vaccines to be distributed faster. Financial assistance has been key for the state.

Ms. Ryan said Colorado had a whole-government approach for testing and vaccine distribution. They are moving as fast as the federal supply chain allowed. The number of doses will increase in the next few weeks, and they are asking for more doses and more visibility for planning points of distribution. The public health system has been historically underfunded, but the problem is scaling a workforce on the state and local level. There must be ongoing support for the public health system. Hospitals have carried much of the weight, and local public health agencies have been setting up mass vaccination clinics. There are societal disparities that COVID has exploited. They will continue to partner with communities to improve equity for vulnerable populations.

Questions and Answers

Chairwoman DeGette said that vaccine supply and predictability have both been challenges and what could be done. **Ms. Ryan** said they need more supply and better predictability of weekly doses to help with planning efforts. **Chairwoman DeGette** asked how the Biden Administration strategy help Michigan. **Ms. Khaldun** said continued support is needed, especially to support personnel and equity. **Chairwoman DeGette** asked what the top suggestion would be to move forward in Illinois. **Ms. Ezike** said one may be on the confusing messaging on masking. Attention and focus on masking is important and is one the first steps. They also want to build the foundation to form trust for those who are skeptical of the vaccine. They do not want to leave any

group behind. **Chairwoman DeGette** asked why flexibility is so important. **Ms. Phillips** said the speed of distribution is not keeping up with the administering rate, which is why flexibility is important. **Chairwoman DeGette** asked how Congress can facilitate better collaboration between the federal and state government. **Mr. Marsh** said that having more vaccines is very important in West Virginia. Dosing is very important, but also an important opportunity to share best practices and their learnings.

Rep. Rodgers asked if anyone anticipated the swiftness of the COVID vaccine. All witnesses said no. **Rep. Rodgers** asked if an attempt of this magnitude has ever been attempted. All witnesses said no. **Rep. Rodgers** asked if Mr. Marsh could speak to the localized approach to the pandemic. **Mr. Marsh** said the state believes that in order to meet the needs of citizens, there must be local involvement so information can be shared. There are so many issues to be dealt with, they have to be agile to create their own supply chain through partnerships. They believe pharmacists should be in charge of vaccines. **Rep. Rodgers** asked what support the CDC provided for each state. **Mr. Marsh** said they created their own program in West Virginia. The other witnesses said they collaborated with CDC.

Rep. Pallone said that he believes there needs to be more federal involvement. States were left alone and competing with each other for necessary COVID supplies and a national strategy is needed, which wasn't present in the prior administration. Rep. Pallone asked Ms. Khaldun about Biden's three prong strategy and if they need more funding with the new COVID bill. **Ms. Khaldun** said that they have at least 3 weeks of transparency for vaccine distribution, which is helpful. They are also thrilled that the Rescue Plan can aid in vaccination efforts and more funding can support infrastructure and staffing efforts. **Rep. Pallone** asked Ms. Ryan how funding would improve state distribution. **Ms. Ryan** said resources can assist in transparency. Sustainability and emergency funds will be important for future pandemics.

Rep. Griffith asked since distribution of COVID vaccines started, why there is a discrepancy between the number of vaccines distributed versus the number of vaccines administered – is there a reason for this discrepancy? **Mr. Marsh** said maintaining control and understanding where vaccines go is important. **Rep. Griffith** asked how they track vaccines. **Mr. Marsh** said there are 5 hubs in the state and they track each dose that is sent with a GPS, as well as when it is administered. Those that are not administered are brought back to the hubs to be re-administered. **Rep. Griffith** said there is confusion on safety and efficacy of the shot, he asked what methods of communications is being used to give critical information to constituents and how they have made efforts to seniors and hard-to-reach areas. **Mr. Marsh** said they are used community-based approaches.

Rep. Kuster is concerned by the CDC data that only 65% distributed have been administered. The issue of supply does not account for large gap between vaccines distributed and administered. Rep. Kuster asked Ms. Phillips and asked if Louisiana is holding back doses for the second dose. **Ms. Phillips** said the CDC percentages accounts for first and second doses. The worry is still availability of the supply in terms of planning. **Rep. Kuster** asked if they would consider giving the first dose if they knew the second does would be manufactured in a 2-4 week time frame. **Ms. Ezike** said that yes, and they would be able to borrow from other facilities to ensure other priority populations can receive the first dose. There is a balance between administering the first and

second doses. **Rep. Kuster** asked how increased transparency can increase speed of doses. **Ms. Khaldun** said that they can plan better for first or second doses.

Rep. Burgess said that there has been a massive shift on vaccine distribution. Rep. Burgess said the approach to the prior administration worked on distribution, but also the manufacturing of the vaccine. Rep. Burgess asked Ms. Ryan how they are keeping up with vaccines. She said that transparency is getting better and have visibility into next two or three weeks.

Rep. Rice said that much of the confusion is due to communication between the federal, state, and local governments. Rep. Rice asked if the communication and coordination with federal officials and programming planning in recent weeks and has been more effective. **Ms. Ryan** said that more visibility has contributed to better communication. Rep. Rice asked if there can be more done to improve communication. **Ms. Phillips** said that the continued communication is important and allows the states to communicate with local providers. The more information they have on the front end will be better for planning purposes. **Rep. Rice** asked what Ms. Ezike's state is doing for communication and what she would recommend. **Ms. Ezike** said collaboration across all levels and agencies is key. Local departments are the hands and feet on the ground getting the work done.

Rep. McKinley said that there hasn't been appropriate attention to Operation Warp Speed. He said states should be grateful that a vaccine is available. Rep. McKinley asked Mr. Marsh to elaborate how vaccines can be distributed more efficiently that other states can model. **Mr. Marsh** said clear communication, breaking down sectors, working towards common goal, and reiterating approach for collaboration. The fact that they have vaccines are game changers, and working together and staying together is important to ensure success.

Rep. Tonko said that there seems to be one constant, which is confusion. He asked if Ms. Phillip's state is facing similar concerns and how they can get more people vaccinated more quickly. **Ms. Phillips** said they are looking at availability so doses are not just sitting, but are being used. **Rep. Tonko** said the Biden Administration promised a three – week forecast, and asked what Mr. Marsh would change to make the process smother. **Mr. Marsh** said that a single dose may have a protective effect on COVID-19 and would like to move forwards with getting as many first doses as possible. With sufficient supply chain, getting as many first does as possible is important, especially with the emergence of COVID variants. **Rep. Tonko** asked Ms. Khaldun if the 16% increase in supply will be able to meet the state's projections. **Ms. Khaldun** said the increase will also be able to target minority populations will be able to get the vaccine and can better allocate for socially vulnerable populations.

Rep. Dunn said each state faces a set of challenges that requires flexibility and creativity. He asked Mr. Marsh if he believes that public-private partnerships will allow states to use more of their resources than a federal mandate. **Mr. Marsh** said that these relationships are beneficial and that private partnerships can meet the state's needs. **Rep. Dunn** asked if that the shots put into arms have been properly recorded and submitted to the CDC. **Mr. Marsh** said he is not sure. **Rep. Dunn** asked what Congress can do to reduce burdens. **Mr. Marsh** said that they need to continue to work with the federal government to establish the supply chain management. There needs to be a coordinating function and constant learning to ensure coordination.

Rep. Ruiz said that health disparities are the results of a failed healthcare system, such as for Latinos, African Americans, and other vulnerable populations. There are disparities to both testing and access to vaccines. A good public health approach prioritizes populations and who should get initial access to vaccines. Despite having disproportionate cases of COVID in minority populations, their white counterparts are getting higher rates of vaccines. Underserved and hardworking communities lack clinics and providers. Rep. Ruiz asked Ms. Ezike how the state has reached vulnerable communities. **Ms. Ezike** said that to eliminate disparities, they must use the equity lens. Black and brown communities are 3x more likely to die than their white counterparts. **Rep. Ruiz** asked Ms. Khaldun how they will monitor vaccines for vulnerable populations and what the federal government can do for best practices. **Ms. Khaldun** said that close partnerships with people on the ground is important, as well as holding partners accountable for how they are receiving vaccines and addressing disparities.

Rep. Schrier said that keeping community needs is important. She asked Ms. Ryan which supplies are they most concerned about and how Congress can stabilize the supply chain. **Ms. Ryan** said that they worry about the supply chain in general that supports vaccine distribution, which is important in the state's response. **Rep. Schrier** asked Mr. Marsh the same question. **Mr. Marsh** said that in West Virginia, they have tried to be more self-sufficient such as designing their own personal protective equipment and testing so they do not need to rely on other supply chains.

Rep. Joyce said that the partnership of Operation Warp Speed produced multiple safe vaccines in record time, which are the silver bullet out of the pandemic. Joyce asked Mr. Marsh if he can share what efforts need to be made so the vaccine deployment can impact all communities, especially rural communities. **Mr. Marsh** said there are three components. The first is everyone must be on the same page and work towards the same goal. The second is open communication. The third is having logistical expertise for the supply chain. Mr. Marsh said they want to expand their infrastructure so they can increase vaccinations. **Rep. Joyce** asked if Operation Warp Speed and its impact on distribution of the vaccine is the light at the end of the tunnel. All witnesses said yes.

Rep. Trahan said it is important to close gaps in disparities. She asked what challenges and best-practices are being used to protect long-term care facilities. **Mr. Marsh** said they wanted to understand how they can quickly and effectively vaccinate both residents and staff members of long-term facilities. They turned to partners and located the number of pharmacies in the state. Mr. Marsh said that there has been an increase in staff who are open to being vaccinated. **Rep. Trahan** asked Ms. Khaldun what is being done to address long term care facilities in Michigan. **Ms. Khaldun** said that they prioritize the most vulnerable in the state, including those in long-term care. They have been challenged by hesitancy and engaging with members of the community. Community workers have been deployed into these neighborhoods to boost number of vaccines being distributed in neighborhoods.

Rep. O'Halleran said that the vaccine program is still not where it needs to be for the vaccine distribution to work at its highest capacity. He wants to understand the disconnect and to ensure that there are no delays in getting the second shot. He also said that some communities have seen stretches in resources. He asked what Ms. Ekize would like to see in a public education campaign

for the vaccine program. **Ms. Ezike** said that these problems predate the COVID-19 pandemic. She said that there needs to be infrastructure building which will help for future pandemics.

Rep. Palmer asked about West Virginia's vaccine distribution. **Mr. Marsh** said the decision was made for the vaccines to run through the pharmacies and having arrangement with long-term facilities was how they distributed vaccines. **Rep. Palmer** asked what can be done to alleviate hesitancy for populations of color and what marsh's experience has done to distribute vaccines to these communities. **Mr. Marsh** said that they recognize the state's underserved populations and have a special taskforce to be able to administer testing and vaccination to communities of color where distrust is prevalent. **Rep. Palmer** asked what is being done for education on the importance of getting vaccinated. **Ms. Khaldun** said that it is important to understand the history of communities of color and why they are hesitant in the first place. They should not shame people who are not hesitant and creating spaces where trust can be built for these communities.

Rep. Schakowsky said that most of the costs of the pandemic have fallen on local and state governments. The \$1.9 trillion package will address the needs of state and local governments. She said that the increase in reach will be important, as well as the expansion of the network to really reach all parts of the state. She said it is important to get the vaccine to older Americans. **Ms. Ezike** said that local departments are being encouraged to expand their phone lines and creating waiting lists to help distribute the vaccine. They need more navigators and community organizers to lead communities to the vaccine.

Rep. Walberg said that the fact that a million doses a day has been achieved is important and they must expand past that goal. He asked why Michigan, in particular, has been slow in administering the vaccine. **Ms. Khaldun** said that the state is in the top tier of vaccinating their population. In the beginning, data was not coming into the CDC and the state was doing better than what appeared. Ms. Khaldun said there were no doses sitting around, but were put into long-term care programs. **Rep. Walberg** asked about vaccinating schools. **Ms. Khaldun** said that Michigan is working with superintendents and school officials to get students and staff vaccinated.

Rep. Soto said that Pfizer was the first vaccine approved, which was not part of Operation Warp Speed. The real lesson is that there has been bipartisan support for funding. Rep. Soto asked Ms. Khaldun what Michigan needs from the federal government to address workforce issues. **Ms. Khaldun** said she is appreciated of the National Guard's help to distribute vaccines. There is a need for more community workers to distribute vaccines. **Ms. Ekize** said they are trying to use as many vaccinators as possible and using trainings to educate non-medical professionals to administer vaccines. **Rep. Soto** asked what Louisiana needs for distribution of vaccines. **Ms. Phillips** said that in addition to vaccines, the state was hit with hurricanes. The 100% Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funding will be helpful to support the needs of the state and ensuring access to all individuals who can administer the vaccine.

Rep. Carter and Rep. Dingell will submit written questions due to technical difficulties during the session.