

MEMORANDUM

Date: May 6, 2020
To: REDC
From: Center Road Solutions

RE: House Committee on Appropriations (Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies) Hearing “COVID-19 Response”

On May 6, the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies held a hearing entitled “COVID-19 Response,” which revolved around a discussion on the governmental response to the COVID-19 pandemic thus far, and on how to shape the approach going forward. The hearing featured two key witnesses with years of expertise studying viruses and pandemics, including one former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Members generally agreed that the federal government must continue to do everything in its power to limit the virus’s spread, but Members disagreed on exactly how that effort should be carried out.

Key Takeaways:

- Both Subcommittee Chairwoman DeLauro (D-CT) and Ranking Member Cole (R-OK) agreed that they would have liked to have Dr. Anthony Fauci testify, as he was scheduled to do so before he was barred by the Administration.
- The fight to contain the spread and reemergence of COVID-19 will be a long and challenging struggle.
- Experts are worried about the impact COVID-19 is having on behavioral health, in terms of both access to care and the fact that the pandemic may cause or contribute to mental health challenges.

Opening Statements:

(Subcommittee Chairwoman) Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-CT):

- All efforts led by the subcommittee to help address the COVID-19 pandemic so far have been bipartisan.
- She is upset about the lack of testing and personal protective equipment (PPE), which could help the United States gain control of the pandemic.
- She is also upset the Administration prevented Dr. Fauci from testifying because President Trump said the House is nothing but a bunch of “Trump haters.” This is a bipartisan subcommittee and Dr. Fauci has testified in front of Congress and this subcommittee dozens of times over his career without issue, in front of Chairs of both parties.
- The subcommittee has provided funding for CDC & the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and appropriated \$175B for hospitals and other providers.
- Today’s hearing will explore necessary science-based measures recommended by the two expert witnesses.
- 3,000 Americans could die per day in the upcoming weeks, there is no time for delay, action is needed now.

(Subcommittee Ranking Member) Rep. Tom Cole (R-OK)

- He joins the Chairwoman in supporting Dr. Fauci being able to testify before the subcommittee today. He thinks Dr. Fauci’s testimony would have been useful to the subcommittee and the nation.
- This subcommittee will be called upon to make important decisions, which will involve sustained investment in the public health sector, he hopes the witnesses today can provide recommendations on that front.
- Keeping workers at home and businesses closed is not a solution that will work in the long term. We need to get the economy going again and get Americans back to work.
- Efforts to reopen must prioritize the health and safety of Americans and avoid reversing progress made.
- This should involve special precautions, including crowd limitations and extra stringent hygienic practices.

Witnesses:

Dr. Tom Frieden, President & CEO, Resolve to Save Lives; Former Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

- The war against COVID-19 will be long and hard, we are just at the beginning and must focus on the future.
- Data is a powerful weapon against the pandemic, real-time monitoring and cluster identification is key.
- After flattening the curve, we need to continue widespread testing and isolating those infected, to ensure we don’t see this virus spread rampantly once again as we have seen with other pandemics.

- Protecting health care workers should be a top priority. No one should put their life on the line to care for others.
- We need to continue to take care of people with other health conditions. He has observed from his past pandemic experiences that people with other conditions can sometimes be unnecessarily neglected during a pandemic.
- Change is needed for the way we allocate funds for pandemics and he supports a health defense operations appropriation.

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

- We should be prioritizing diagnostic testing. Last week we conducted 1.6M tests, but estimates indicate we need 3.5M tests per week. There needs to be a national plan for addressing this gap.
- We currently have little understanding on where people are getting infected. Understanding this better will help us design future responsive efforts and give Americans the best possible advice.
- We also need to make sure not to overload the health system when states and localities begin to reopen.
- There is nothing like the National Weather Service for infectious diseases, and we should consider establishing a national center that would carry out pandemic forecasting and analytics.

Q&A Session:

- **Chairwoman DeLauro (D-CT):** Is there a single state that has met the necessary parameters to ease restrictions?
 - **Dr. Rivers:** There are four criteria: see the number of new cases decline for two weeks, public health capacity to conduct contact tracing on all new cases, capacity to treat everyone safely, and enough diagnostic testing for everyone with COVID-like symptoms, to her knowledge no states meet all of these.
 - **Dr. Frieden:** He hasn't looked at all of the data, different parts of states may be different. We also need to remember that easing restrictions should be viewed as a dimmer, not an on/off switch.
- **Ranking Member Cole (R-OK):** Could you speak more about the health defense budget designation?
 - **Dr. Frieden:** If the funding is discretionary or mandatory, there are still issues either way. We've suggested something similar to the overseas contingency operations account, this is a defense issue. It should not be seen as a research piggy bank, but rather as an investment in our national defense.
- **Rep. Clark (D-MA):** Should we be aiming to test 1% of the population once per week, is that the right target?
 - **Dr. Rivers:** That is mostly right, but we want to focus on symptomatic people and essential workers.
 - **Dr. Frieden:** We released guidelines on how we should prioritize testing for those who need it most.
- **Rep. Harris (R-MD):** Why shouldn't a small business be able to operate with safety measures?
 - **Dr. Rivers:** It is to the advantage of the economy to contain the pandemic; people will be reluctant to visit small businesses if they think there is a risk they might get infected.
- **Rep. Bustos (D-IL):** How do we handle this pandemic in rural areas versus major cities like New York City?
 - **Dr. Frieden:** The challenges in urban areas may be more severe, such as with public transportation. No area is immune to the virus, factories and nursing homes pose the potential for spread anywhere.
 - **Dr. Rivers:** We need to make sure rural areas have the resources they need to combat infection spikes.
- **Rep. Watson Coleman (D-NJ):** Can you speak to the development of a vaccine?
 - **Dr. Frieden:** Dr. Fauci has said 12-18 months could be a possible timeline for the development of a vaccine, some are already in Stage 1 trials. However, vaccine development is uncertain, it might take a long time and it might not be as effective as we would like.
 - **Dr. Rivers:** Developing the vaccine is only the first step, manufacturing and distribution matter as well.
- **Rep. Bustos (D-IL):** Can you talk about behavioral health from a public health viewpoint, what action can the subcommittee take on this issue?
 - **Dr. Rivers:** Support, treatment, and continuity of care is under supported in behavioral health chronically, it's possible that this pandemic will intensify those disparities.
 - **Dr. Frieden:** Four areas of concern: interruption of needed care, substance abuse, acute trauma of losing family members and loved ones, and psychological impacts to frontline responders.
- **Rep. Herrera Beutler (D-WA):** State parks are being reopened in Washington, and the state is asking federal authorities to open federal lands. Can recreational activities help balance out mental health concerns?
 - **Dr. Rivers:** Outdoor areas are low risk for transmission. I agree in the reopening of those areas.
 - **Dr. Frieden:** I would agree. The one concern is where people go after the outdoor space. Also, it is key to plan for objects that people might touch repeatedly, such as doorknobs.