

SENATE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR & PENSIONS: COVID-19: UPDATED ON PROGRESS TOWARD SAFELY GETTING BACK TO WORK AND BACK TO SCHOOL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) [convened](#) a hearing to discuss the necessary steps to safely reopen schools and the economy. Trump Administration officials from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) testified about their agency's efforts to support states in reopening through guidance and recommendations, increased testing capacity, and the development of therapeutics and vaccines. Members of the committee questioned the panel on considerations for schools when reopening and the importance of masks to control the current surge in cases. Other Senators focused on the safety and efficacy of a COVID-19 vaccine, testing capacity, and other COVID-19 treatments.

OPENING STATEMENTS

In his opening statement, **Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN)** emphasized that while children have a low infection rate, they still have become a victim of the pandemic due to school closures. He detailed that lack of access to schools has resulted in unintended consequences such as undetected child abuse, food insecurity, social isolation, depression, and suicidal ideation. He stated that it is not an issue of whether to go back to school and work, but how to do it safely, and suggested that the Administration update the guidelines for reopening. He asked the witnesses to speak to diagnostics, vaccines, and treatments and considerations for school superintendents and presidents. Chairman Alexander was also looking for witnesses to clarify the importance of contact tracing, diagnostic tests and who pays for them, and how flu season will interact with the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, he referenced his white paper on future recommendations to improve pandemic response and the need to think proactively before the next pandemic.

Ranking Member Patty Murray (D-WA) stated that the Administration's COVID-19 response has been a disaster and the pandemic is not fading as cases spike across the country. She asserted that the biggest failure has been around testing and the lack of a coordinated national testing plan. Ranking Member Murray then expressed concern around the lack of national vaccine plan and the need to hold the Administration accountable. She detailed that the plan should include how to ensure vaccine safety and efficacy, a distribution strategy, and how to overcome barriers such as vaccine hesitancy and misinformation. She concluded that the last COVID-19 relief package was passed 46 days ago, and because the country is still in crisis, the Senate needs to come together to pass the next package.

WITNESS TESTIMONY

Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the NIH, outlined the agency's four-prong approach to infectious diseases and COVID-19, in his [testimony](#). Dr. Fauci detailed that the first prong is fundamental research about the virus, which is used help developed diagnostics and therapeutics. The second prong is diagnostics, which Dr. Fauci explained must be available at the point of care, simple, precise, sensitive, specific, in order to capture accurate diagnoses. He emphasized that testing will be critical as schools reopen. He continued that the third prong is therapeutics, and he referenced the success of remdesivir in accelerating recovery from COVID-19. Finally, Dr. Fauci stated that the fourth prong, vaccines, is the most important aspect in combatting the virus. He detailed that through Operation Warp Speed a favorable vaccine candidate is entering phase three clinical trial in July and while development is happening rapidly, safety and efficacy are not being compromised. He concluded that he is "cautiously optimistic" that a vaccine will be available be the end of 2020 or beginning of 2021.

In his [testimony](#), **CDC Director Dr. Robert Redfield** detailed that as cases are beginning to spike in across the South East and South West, the CDC has deployed 48 teams to provide technical assistance to state and tribal health departments. He referenced previously issue guidelines for reopening and new guidance that provides recommendations to higher education administrators on COVID-19 testing as institutions reopen. He noted that testing recommendations for kindergarten through twelfth grade would be issued next week. Dr. Redfield then shifted to the disparities in COVID-19 cases the CDC's prioritization to collect data on these disparities and deploy resources to communities most impacted. He concluded by stating that everyone has a personal responsibility to themselves and others to social distance, wear a mask, and wash their hands.

Admiral Brett Giroir, Assistant Secretary for Health at HHS, [testified](#) about his role in leading testing efforts and his concern about the recent outbreak of cases. Admiral Giroir detailed that before schools can reopen, the country must first control the outbreaks and minimize community spread. He continued that the trend of cases can be reversed by protecting the vulnerable and following the guidelines as prescribed by the CDC, which include social distancing, wearing a mask, staying home if you feel sick, and washing your hands. Admiral Giroir recommended that school superintendents and presidents following the CDC guidelines for reopening and collaborate with their state health department on testing needs. He further detailed that each state has a customized testing plan that drives the distribution of certain testing supplies. He concluded that the agency's most recent testing effort is focused on pooling samples, which will dramatically increased the number of samples processed per day.

In his [testimony](#), **FDA Commissioner Dr. Stephen Hahn** detailed the agency's use of regulatory flexibility to increase access to diagnostics and medical supplies through Emergency Use Authorizations. He then referenced newly issued guidance to assist in the development of vaccines, by providing regulatory standards for approval. He emphasized that the FDA is committed to help expedite this work, but will not sacrifice safety and efficacy in doing so. He concluded by detailing the agency's current review process of actions to date to improve the FDA's COVID-19 response processes.

MEMBER DISCUSSION

School Reopening

Chairman Alexander asked what should school superintendents consider when resuming school. Dr. Fauci replied that considerations are dependent of the dynamics of the outbreak where the school is located, which include which phase of reopening the state is in. Dr. Fauci emphasized that the goal should be to get children back in schools by using public health tools, such as social distancing and face masks.

Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) stated how children rarely spread COVID-19 and how other countries have successfully reopened schools without experiencing a spike in cases. He also referenced other case studies that demonstrate a low prevalence of COVID-19 among children and the American Academy of Pediatrics policy recommendations that suggest resuming in-person learning. He concluded by emphasizing the importance of children returning to school this fall. Dr. Fauci agreed that getting children back to school should be a priority, but the impact of children on the COVID-19 transmission cycle is not completely known. Dr. Redfield further detailed that information on child transmission is currently being collected.

Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME) and **Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI)** asked if higher education institutions will have enough capacity to test students. Dr. Fauci detailed that schools can utilize sample pooling to test 5 to 15 samples at time and dramatically increase testing capacity. Admiral Giroir added that universities should coordinate with the state to ensure their testing needs are included in the state testing plan. He also detailed that there is an adequate supply of ancillary supplies, such as reagents and swabs, needed for testing.

Reopening the Economy

Ranking Member Murray referenced the recent spike in cases in Florida, Arizona, Texas and asked what the government and states need to do to reverse this trend. Dr. Fauci expressed concern with the recent rise in cases and emphasized following the CDC guidelines on reopening, while not skipping over critical checkpoints. He also estimated that cases could surge to 100,000 per day if individuals continue to gather in large crowds without masks.

Sen. Bernie Sanders (D-VT) asked if wide-spread distribution of free masks would encourage better adherence. Dr. Fauci replied that he was supportive of that idea and Admiral Giroir added that the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR) is working on procuring cloth masks.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) asked how important public health infrastructure is to contact tracing during reopening. Dr. Redfield stated that the current infrastructure system needs aggressive modernization and a substantial investment is needed. He continued that some states are still using “pen and paper” reporting and contact tracing is heavily dependent on real-time data for predictability.

COVID-19 Vaccines

Ranking Member Murray asked if the Administration has developed a national vaccine plan. Dr. Redfield detailed that the CDC is working on a vaccine distribution and prioritization plan, as well as strategies to increase vaccine confidence. **Sen. Tim Scott (R-SC)** asked how the Administration would be proactive on vaccine confidence. Dr. Fauci detailed that there is an existing community engagement program out of Operation Warp Speed, and he stressed the importance of “boots on the ground” in areas that are typically vaccine hesitant.

Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA) asked Dr. Hahn what steps the FDA would take to “earn the public’s trust” on the safety and efficacy of a vaccine. Dr. Hahn responded that the FDA has drawn a line between the agency’s regulatory independence and vaccine developers, by only providing technical assistance and staying out of the development decision making process. He further detailed that the FDA would rely solely on science and data when examining safety and will uphold the agency’s rigorous standards.

Sen. Tina Smith (D-MN) asked how can safety and efficacy of a vaccine be proven in such a short timeframe. Dr. Fauci responded that Operation Warp Speed will enroll over 30,000 people in clinical trials to provide the necessary safety data and information will be collected after a vaccine has been licensed as well. Dr. Hahn also added that the FDA would not waive manufacturer liability for a vaccine.

Sen. Mike Braun (R-IN) referenced herd immunity and asked what portion of the population would need to be vaccinated to achieve it. Dr. Fauci estimated that between 70 to 80 percent of the population would need to be vaccinated, but the science of herd immunity for COVID-19 is unknown. He also added that it is unclear how long immunity to COVID-19 lasts, which will inform vaccine frequency in the future.

Testing Capacity

Sen. Richard Burr (R-NC) referenced prior testing failures and asked how the Administration will improve testing over the next several months. Dr. Redfield detailed that the CDC is working with states on their testing plans and are continuing to increase contact tracing capacity. Sen. Collins asked how the Administration matches testing demands and supply. Admiral Giroir responded that the Administration has a prioritization plan, which is currently focused on states with a surge in cases. He added that he works with each state individually to determine testing needs and supplies to meet those needs.

COVID-19 Treatments

Chairman Alexander asked if there would be multiple COVID-19 treatment available by the fall. Dr. Hahn responded that while remdesivir is the only drug with Emergency Use Authorization, there is promising data for convalescent plasma treatments and monoclonal antibodies. Dr. Hahn was optimistic for multiple treatments by fall.