

HOUSE SELECT SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS: HYBRID HEARING WITH SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES ALEX AZAR

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis [convened](#) a hearing with Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Alex Azar to examine the Administration's political interference in the COVID-19 pandemic response. Secretary Azar emphasized the importance of science driving all decisions made at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and refuted any notion of political interference. Democrat members of the Subcommittee presented a [report](#) that details forty-seven incidents where the Trump Administration exerted political pressure to "overrule and sideline top scientists and undermine Americans' health to advance the President's partisan agenda." Republican members defended the Administration's response by highlighting the success of the President's actions in lowering the number cases and the development of COVID-19 vaccines.

OPENING STATEMENTS

In his [opening statement](#), **Chairman James Clyburn (D-SC)** referenced numerous instances in which the Trump Administration interfered with COVID-19 response efforts. He detailed how the President failed to implement a national testing plan, left frontline workers vulnerable without critical personal protective equipment (PPE), and influenced critical CDC and FDA communications and actions for political gain. Chairman Clyburn criticized Secretary Azar for not preserving scientific integrity throughout the pandemic when the United States is usually regarded as the gold standard for scientific innovation and breakthroughs. He concluded by urging the Administration to put partisan politics aside, embrace science, and demonstrate the leadership needed to control the pandemic.

Ranking Member Steve Scalise (R-LA) rebutted the idea that President Trump does not have a national plan for the COVID-19 pandemic, in his opening statement. Ranking Member Scalise outlined the Administration's efforts to procure PPE and ventilators through operation airbridge and invoking the Defense Production Act; increase testing capacity and distribute testing machines to nursing homes; safely reopen the economy; and rapidly develop and manufacture a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine. He emphasized that this comprehensive plan is continually be updated with new guidance as more is learned about the virus and this plan is resulting in decreases in overall cases and deaths.

WITNESS TESTIMONY

In his testimony, **HHS Secretary Alex Azar** commended the efforts and heroism of so many healthcare providers and scientists across the agency that have contributed to the progress made against the pandemic. Secretary Azar noted that throughout his career at HHS he has always recognized and promoted the value and science but acknowledged that science does leave room for debates and deliberation. He continued to elucidate that the highest priority is to ensure that decisions are science driven and CDC, FDA, and NIH are the gold standard for this process. Secretary Azar then recounted the unprecedented speed in which HHS has pursued a COVID-19 vaccine, which started in January with research at the NIH, and thanked Congress for supporting the effort which has resulted in four candidates currently in Phase 3 clinical trials.

MEMBER DISCUSSION

Administration COVID Response Performance

Chairman Clyburn asked Secretary Azar why the United States has performed so poorly compared to other countries. Secretary Azar responded that any loss of life is regrettable, but in pandemic situations people die and he asserted that the aggressive actions taken by Administration early on could have potentially saved 2 million lives. Chairman Clyburn then asked the Secretary if he thought he has fulfilled HHS's mission to enhance the health and well-being of all Americans by providing effective health and human services. Secretary Azar replied that he felt he had upheld that mission by bringing scientific experts, including Dr. Fauci and Dr. Birx, to the forefront during the pandemic to provide critical information directly to Americans.

Ranking Member Scalise referenced a recent testimony from Dr. Fauci who stated that President Trump made the right decisions and asked Secretary Azar if he thought the President made the correct decisions as well. Secretary Azar detailed that he was with President Trump when important decisions, such as preventing travel and shutting down the economy, were made and felt that the President made swift decisions based on scientific input that saved American lives.

COVID-19 Vaccine Confidence

Rep. Jacki Walorski (R-IN) noted that vaccine could possibly be the best chance at getting back to normal and asked whether all Americans would be able to get a vaccine once available. Secretary Azar replied that all Americans will have access to a vaccine without cost sharing. Rep. Walorski then asked if any safety steps have been eliminated to accelerate the development process in Operation Warp Speed (OWS), to which Secretary Azar confirmed that no safety steps have been eliminated and the accelerated timeframe is achieved through financial risk and not safety risks. Rep. Walorski also referenced presidential nominee Joe Biden's doubt in the FDA approval process and asked how this may undermine vaccine confidence. Secretary Azar responded that anyone that undermines faith in a vaccine is doing the whole country a disservice due to vaccines' ability to save lives.

Rep. Bill Foster (D-IL) also emphasized the importance of public confidence in a vaccine and the need for robust bipartisan Congressional oversight of the approval process. He noted that OWS has been slow to provide the Government Accountability Office (GAO) access to the project and asked the Secretary to commit to greater oversight. Secretary Azar detailed that HHS has been very open to the GAO during the

pandemic, with 32 open audits on COVID-19, and committed to working with the office on OWS. Rep. Foster also referenced recent reports that the FDA would issue emergency use authorization (EUA) guidance for vaccines and asked who ultimately approves such guidance. Secretary Azar detailed that the guidance essentially encapsulates information that has already been sent to manufacturers and establishes the standards for EUA approval. He also noted that FDA guidance is subject to the White House's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) review.

Rep. Maxine Waters (D-CA) referenced a recent press conference with President Trump in which he alluded that a vaccine would be arriving "very soon" and likely before election day. Rep. Waters further noted that Moderna has stated that the earliest they could submit their data for FDA review would be November 25 and asked whether President Trump's statement undermines vaccine confidence. Secretary Azar felt that the President was merely expressing optimism and emphasized that a vaccine would only be approved once the data is comprehensive and ready.

CDC Testing Guidance

Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) and **Rep. Nydia Velazquez (D-NY)** mentioned that President Trump wanted to slow down testing and the subsequent CDC guidance that recommended against asymptomatic individuals getting a COVID-19 test. Secretary Azar clarified that the guidance did not recommend against testing asymptomatic individuals, but rather encouraged asymptomatic individuals to get a test and complete the recommended quarantine requirements. He further explained that this recommendation was eventually retracted to encourage all exposed individuals to get tested.

Use of Masks and Face Coverings

Rep. Waters, Rep. Velazquez, and **Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-MD)** emphasized the importance of masks in preventing the spread of the virus and potentially saving thousands of lives and asked why the President refuses to wear a mask and set an example for the country. Secretary Azar replied that it has been the agency's recommendation since reopening began in April to adhere to the three W's: wash your hands, wear a mask, and watch your distance. The Secretary did not expand on why the President does not wear a mask or whether he has had conversations on the topic with the President.

Telehealth

Rep. Blaine Luetkemeyer (R-MO) spoke about the success of the telehealth expansion during the pandemic and asked what steps were necessary to preserve these changes. Secretary Azar lauded the telehealth expansion but noted that Congress needs to take action to remove the rural limitation and preserve the ability to receive telehealth within a patient's home. Secretary Azar did not support walking back these flexibilities in the future.