

Opening Statement for Chairman Ron Johnson
The Role of the Strategic National Stockpile in Pandemic Response
Wednesday, June 24, 2020

As prepared for delivery:

COVID-19 continues to inflict a terrible human and economic toll on the United States. In just over five months, the U.S. has experienced over 120,000 deaths and over 2 million total infections, and tens of millions have lost their jobs. As Congress reviews our response to COVID-19, it is important to take the lessons we have learned during this crisis to better prepare for a pandemic or other biological event of this scale in the future.

The focus of today's hearing is the Strategic National Stockpile (SNS). First established with a \$51 million appropriation in 1998 as the National Pharmaceutical Stockpile, the SNS was codified in 2002 and obtained its current name with an expanded mission in 2003. Over the years, management responsibility for the SNS has changed between different agencies within HHS and DHS.

In developing a plan for the committee's oversight of the federal government's response to the Coronavirus, the role of SNS was an obvious area of interest. I had assumed that staff would be able to quickly obtain the list of items that should be held, together with the required and actual inventory levels of each item. Once again, I learned that it is dangerous to assume. We quickly found out that those lists do not exist, or certainly are not made available to Congress or the public.

As we will hear in testimony, it's not from a lack of dedicated individuals working within the agencies or with the SNS. Instead, it seems to be a more pervasive problem of a lack of clarity and understanding of exactly what the SNS's role is and what it should be. As indicated above, to the extent there has been a congressional or executive branch articulated mission statement, it has evolved over time, and outside the managing department or agency, it has not been generally understood.

We are paying the price for this lack of articulation and clarity during the current pandemic. The frustration expressed by state, local, tribal and territorial governments and their elected representatives is largely caused by the reality that demand for so many of the needed products and supplies has dramatically exceeded the supply - both in the form of available inventory and production capacity.

As a manufacturer in the private sector, whenever I was faced with a new problem, I always asked what opportunity presented itself in finding a solution. The same dynamic can apply here. As the men and women working tirelessly to address the current demand develop data and models, that information needs to be captured and put to immediate use updating and redesigning the structure and management of the SNS.

I'd like to thank our witnesses today for their testimony, their past efforts, and any future help they can provide to improve our nation's response to future pandemics.