

“Evaluating the Federal Government’s Procurement and Distribution Strategies in

Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic”

Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Johnson

June 9, 2020

As prepared for delivery:

In less than four months, the COVID-19 virus has infected more than 1.8 million Americans and tragically killed more than 100,000. The novel nature of the virus has presented significant challenges for the federal government and states in a number of areas, but particularly in procuring and distributing critical medical equipment and supplies. The focus of today’s oversight hearing is to understand how the federal government has reacted to those challenges, and begin to evaluate what may be necessary to ensure we are better prepared in the future.

On March 13th, President Trump issued an emergency declaration nationwide to all 50 states, territories, and the District of Columbia. That action circumvented the need for state executives to formally request federal aid and expedited delivery of emergency protective measures across the country. The President also encouraged states to apply for a major disaster declaration. New York was the first state to request a major disaster declaration. By April 17th, the President had issued a major disaster declaration to all 56 states and territories.

On March 19th, Vice President Pence, as the head of the President’s Coronavirus Task Force, designated the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to lead the federal response to COVID-19. Following that announcement, FEMA activated the National Response Coordination Center to a Level 1 - its highest level. The Level 1 activation provides a centralized place for agency leads across the federal government to coordinate and facilitate a unified response, and provides a clearinghouse for states to process their requests for assistance.

It is evident that our preparedness enterprise, resources, and supply chains were stressed past the capacity required to meet a nationwide pandemic. We have faced challenges predicting the future demand of personal protective equipment, diagnostic tests, and other medically-necessary equipment, and to meet actual demand with timely, sufficient supply. The administration has worked to combat these challenges through a coordinated response focused on innovative and expedited procurement and distribution programs, including Project Airbridge.

But it is important to note that as with every disaster, the entities best positioned to serve Americans are at the state and local level. FEMA has maintained that the best delivery model for emergency management is one that is locally-executed, state-managed, and federally-supported, and I agree. Those at the state and local level know best how to craft a response, allocate necessary resources, and implement guidelines to protect their specific communities depending on their distinct characteristics, challenges, and requirements. We can and must find ways to encourage and assist states to be better prepared for pandemics and other disasters in the future.

The men and women of FEMA and the Department of Health and Human Services have worked tirelessly for many months to help save Americans’ lives. We owe them and our witnesses here today a great deal of gratitude for their service.