



**Statement before the
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs**

*“The Role of the Strategic National Stockpile in
Pandemic Response.”*

A Testimony by:

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Remote Hearing

Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Peters, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear today. The topic of the Strategic National Stockpile (SNS) could not be more timely: its mission, the maintenance of its inventory, and the effective management of its relationships with industry and state, local, tribal and territorial authorities. Thank you for your leadership in this critical area.

The SNS is a critical asset in our nation's readiness against health security threats from both infectious outbreaks and deliberate bioterror attacks. I saw that first hand in my seven years as Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In that period, I also had the pleasure of working closely with Greg Burel, who directed the stockpile for twelve years. I am delighted that he is joining us here today.

In the face of an unprecedented public health crisis like the coronavirus, we have seen the SNS deliver some promising innovations but at the same time discovered areas where there is room for improvement. I believe the time is now to systematically examine how to best strengthen the SNS performance to be the most effective, efficient, and responsive during a pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic provides us an opportunity to make pragmatic changes; we must act now to avoid becoming complacent and finding ourselves in the same position when the next pandemic occurs.

For the past two years, I have co-chaired with former Senator Kelly Ayotte the Center for Strategic International Studies (CSIS) Commission on Strengthening America's Health Security. Members of Congress on the Commission include: Senators Murray and Young, and Representatives Bera, Brooks, Cole, and Eshoo, in addition to several security experts. In November 2019, the Commission released a report entitled, *Ending the Cycle of Crisis and Complacency*. The report lays out several key steps that the Administration and Congress should take to create a sustainable foundation for strengthening the health security of Americans.

These recommendations include:

- Establishing permanent leadership at the National Security Council to guarantee effective oversight of global health security and biodefense policy and spending;
- Long-term financing of capacity-building among low income partner countries;
- Enhanced commitments to accelerate new vaccines, therapies, and diagnostics;
- Greater operational capability to execute in disordered settings around the world; and
- More aggressive efforts to combat disinformation and promote better communications that are science and evidence-based.

I would like to request your consent to submit the full *Ending the Cycle of Crisis and Complacency* report into the Congressional Record.

Recognizing the unforeseen challenges to America's health security that the coronavirus pandemic has revealed, we have committed to extend the work of the Commission through 2022. We have begun discussions to determine the priorities for this next phase. The Commission's work thus far has acknowledged the importance of the SNS but has not made it a major focus of

our analytic work. However, as the Commission's work advances, we would welcome the opportunity to collaborate further with the Committee on examining additional actions needed to strengthen the stockpile.

For today's discussion, I would like to highlight a few select points.

First, it is important to reaffirm a clear vision of what constitutes success for the stockpile and the essential factors needed to achieve that success. I believe the essential elements should include:

- A truly strategic approach that is forward looking, tied explicitly to evolving U.S. national interests, preemptive, and agile in its ongoing adaptation. We should not build a stockpile based on previous pandemics but rather build a stockpile that anticipates what a future pandemic will likely require. This will require science and some imagination.
- An effective balance in the stockpile's dual mission of addressing public health and biodefense threats.
- A deep commitment to serve its partners at the state, local, tribal, and territorial levels.
- Robust, long-term financing that meets true needs and adequately plans for regular replenishment.
- Special attention to the needs of vulnerable and marginalized populations. The pandemic and the resulting economic crisis have reinforced that racial and ethnic minority groups, individuals living in poverty, the elderly, and those with underlying health conditions bear a disproportionate burden of risk and suffering. These considerations need to be built into our policy approaches to address future pandemics, including ensuring that changes to the SNS help solve the critical needs of these special populations.
- Collaborative relationships with private industry that are based on transparency and accountability, so that the innovation within the private sector can be leveraged to its fullest potential in the development of medical countermeasures that often lack strong commercial market incentives.
- Continuous assessment and review of strategy, performance, and priorities.

Second, it is essential to clarify the core mission of the SNS. In April, the Administration defined the SNS's mission as a supplement to the action taken by states and local governments – a stop-gap measure only in case of need beyond those immediate actions. I believe the original mission – which envisioned the SNS as a lead national mechanism charged with strategically anticipating and answering the needs of states and localities across the full range of public health emergencies – must be restored.

One stark lesson from our experience with the coronavirus crisis thus far is the acute fragility of U.S. supply chains. This was seen in the availability of diagnostic tests, reagents, personal protective equipment, ventilators, and oxygen. I believe that when states and local governments are left to fend for themselves when supplies are scarce, in an uncoordinated way, it can lead to a chaotic free-for-all in the marketplace that is not efficient when time is of the essence. Having

the SNS strategically coordinating the fast-breaking needs of its partners can stabilize markets, ensure accountability, and effectively address hot spots and other urgent priority areas.

Third, as we learned in the CSIS Commission's work on the oversight of international health security programs, it is essential to have clear lines of responsibility and authority. This is one area where, I believe, more work can and should be done with respect to the SNS. It is unclear who exactly controls the stockpile, as well as the precise chain of command for its use. Resolving these issues are fundamental to executing a clear vision. Congress can contribute to achieving this clarity by conducting an open and thorough examination of these questions.

Fourth, we need to take full account of the many innovations happening in the face of the coronavirus pandemic, and better understand how the SNS can make optimal use of them. I was impressed by the recent report of the Ad hoc Pandemic Response Group, which highlighted the need to focus on the accelerated speed of manufacturing, the conversions underway of private and public spaces, the reuse of medical items, and the repurposing of manufacturing. Americans have risen to the challenges of acute scarcities in highly creative ways that have revealed options we have not imagined.

Finally, the government must prepare the SNS capacity aggressively and rapidly for the challenges that lie just over the horizon – namely, the threat of a second coronavirus wave later this year, and the arrival (we hope) of safe and effective vaccines and medicines.

Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Peters, and distinguished members of the Committee, the health security needs of the U.S. are formidable and complicated, but the SNS is a critical part of fulfilling those needs. We must rely on the lessons from this historical moment to design an approach to improving the SNS that takes advantage of the opportunities for positive change that lie in front of us. We need to remain pragmatic and focused on what are truly important issues for the future safety and health of Americans. Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify here today, and it is my sincere hope that we can work closely together to advance the U.S. health security agenda.