

Chairman Peters Opening Statement As Prepared for Delivery
Full Committee Hearing: Preparedness for COVID-19: The Initial Pandemic Response and
Lessons Learned
April 14, 2021

First, I want to thank each of our witnesses for joining today's important discussion, which will be the first in a series of hearings focusing on the federal government's preparation for, and response to, the Coronavirus pandemic.

We have to examine and confront our failures, identify and build on what went right, and propose reforms to ensure our nation can combat this pandemic and be better prepared to prevent and respond to future pandemics and public health threats.

I appreciate Ranking Member Portman for joining me to conduct bipartisan oversight of the federal pandemic preparedness and response efforts. This approach is a clear example of how this committee is stronger when we work together.

And no challenge requires a bipartisan approach more than tackling this once in a lifetime pandemic. Since the first cases were diagnosed in the United States, more than 562,000 Americans have lost their lives.

And while Congress has provided critical relief, over the course of this pandemic, millions of Americans lost their jobs, families continue struggling to make ends meet, and countless small businesses are being forced to close their doors permanently.

With more than 4 million Americans getting immunized every day, and the number of deaths from Coronavirus declining, there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

But we are not out of the dark yet. I am concerned that cases continue to rise, particularly in my home state of Michigan.

While vaccines are an important step to prevent the spread of COVID-19, we still need to practice social distancing, wear masks, and follow the advice of public health experts to get the resurgence of this virus under control, especially as variants continue to spread across the country.

Tragically, it didn't have to be this way. The lives lost, the permanent changes to people's personal health, the economic devastation, and the long months of personal sacrifice and suffering were not inevitable.

Adherence to years of pandemic planning by prior administrations, decisive action, and clear leadership from the Trump Administration could have helped mitigate this pandemic.

In fact, since the first whole of government pandemic response plan was published in 2005, the United States has had ample opportunity to prepare for public health crises.

Professionals across our government spent years working to improve our pandemic preparedness, from a pandemic response playbook drafted by the National Security Council in 2016, to a 2019 Department of Health and Human Services series of exercises called Crimson Contagion that simulated a highly contagious airborne influenza pandemic.

In 2019, I conducted an investigation and released a report that identified the serious national security risks posed by our overreliance on foreign manufacturers for critical drugs and medical supplies.

My report found the United States was unprepared to deliver vaccinations on the scale needed during a pandemic, and made critical recommendations that could help onshore manufacturing for essential supplies.

Unfortunately, despite preemptive actions and warnings, the previous Administration failed to take necessary steps that would have limited the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Instead of acting swiftly and decisively, the previous Administration chose to sideline our nation's foremost medical experts and failed to implement a comprehensive national strategy that left individual states to combat the virus all on their own.

In fact, we know President Trump was aware the virus was both deadly and contagious as early as February 2020. However, he continued to tell the American people it would "miraculously disappear" and initially even compared its effects to the flu, when scientific evidence clearly showed Coronavirus was more lethal.

At a time when the Administration could have provided clear and consistent communication – supported scientific guidance on needed public health measures, and ramped up production of PPE and other critical medical supplies through emergency contracts and fully invoking the Defense Production Act, among other critical actions, the previous Administration sought to downplay the virus's severity to the public.

On top of those failures, there have been numerous reports of widespread political interference in federal agencies' COVID-19 response, including reports that Health and Human Services political appointees reviewed and may have altered or delayed weekly scientific reports issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention about the pandemic.

The Trump Administration's inaction and efforts to minimize the threat posed by COVID-19 contributed to the carnage our communities have seen over the past year.

Despite representing only four percent of the world's population, by January 2021, the United States accounted for nearly a quarter of the global COVID-19 cases.

There's no question that the federal government must learn from these missteps and urgently work to strengthen our pandemic response, to ensure we can both combat the ongoing pandemic, and prevent the next crisis, whatever it may be, from reaching this magnitude.

Today, we will hear from former officials from key agencies in federal government, all of whom are widely credited experts in their respective public health and emergency preparedness fields.

I look forward to a frank and open discussion and clear and candid recommendations about what we must do to avoid past mistakes moving forward. It is our duty to ensure our nation is better able to meet whatever the next crisis may be.