

Prepared Statement of Ranking Member Richard Burr

Stopping the Spread of Monkeypox: Examining the Federal Response

September 14, 2022

Good morning. I'm glad that we are finally having a hearing on the monkeypox outbreak that is hitting our nation. While monkeypox is now a public health emergency, it did not have to become one.

Since May, when the first transmission was reported in the UK and Europe, I have been pressing the Administration for a strategy and a plan.

After almost three years of the COVID pandemic, you would think that the public health agencies responsible for our preparedness and response would be prepared for anything — particularly a threat like monkeypox which we have known about for decades and for which we have vaccines and treatments.

It is almost the definitional case of what the CDC, ASPR, and their sister agencies should be prepared to tackle.

A virus that spreads through physical contact. A virus that spreads when an infected person has an obvious sign of infection. This is not like COVID which was a newly emerged virus that spread through asymptomatic infection.

But by any measure, in fact by every measure, the response from the Biden Administration on the monkeypox crisis has been one of catastrophic failure.

You repeated each of the mistakes of the early days of the COVID response, and the cultural arrogance from the public health officials who are supposed to be at the forefront of our response let our country down, again.

Since the COVID pandemic started, this Committee has held 13 hearings on the response – during both the Trump and Biden Administrations.

I'd think you were just as sick of being called to the carpet as we are of having to hold you accountable because of your systemic failures.

But it seems that nothing has changed. You can't blame the last Administration for these failures; they are all yours.

Failures in our response to monkeypox

The first confirmed case of monkeypox in 2022 was May 7th in the United Kingdom.

The first US case of monkeypox in this outbreak was reported on May 18th. We had warning that this was coming, and we should have been prepared to manage what came when it arrived.

Let's review.

You failed on testing.

Although you eventually made testing available through the Laboratory Response Network, these tests were too hard to access. It took weeks before

doctors were able to get their patients tested without having to first consult public health officials.

There was also a significant delay in engaging the private sector on testing at the beginning of the outbreak — you waited until June 22nd to announce any engagement with the private sector. Still, after that, companies interested in developing additional diagnostics that could help address some of the slow turnaround times and improve access have been left waiting months for samples needed to develop tests, with delay upon delay.

You failed on vaccines.

An “enhanced” strategy to offer vaccines to at-risk individuals and known contacts was announced June 28th, but this was already after some local jurisdictions had taken it upon themselves to use the vaccine in this manner and a full month after the UK Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation met to discuss a similar strategy for its citizens.

Why do we continue to be behind?

Meanwhile, decisions about vaccine administration in the US have been made seemingly on the fly. Even when FDA issued an emergency use authorization last month allowing the vaccine to be administered by intradermal injection, there were no meetings of FDA or CDC’s outside experts to publicly

discuss relevant questions on the minds of impacted Americans and inform these decisions.

Health professionals were confused about the initial decision, and patients were scared that they were being experimented on.

To make matters worse, states had no time to prepare for this change in vaccine administration. Right after FDA made its decision, ASPR reduced states' vaccine allocations under the assumption that every vial would yield five doses. Yet, we know that this has not been the case in every state, resulting in some states vaccinating fewer at-risk people.

You failed on having a plan.

Monkeypox outbreaks have been occurring in Nigeria and other places with increasing frequency. It was an identified threat, and a threat for which we had countermeasures stockpiled.

But it seems there was no real plan on how to respond and what information and research we needed to understand this outbreak. Only after both I and the Chair sent separate letters asking for a plan did the Office of Science and Technology Policy blog about their research priorities. But the priorities were vague, and it's not clear what research activities HHS has actually undertaken in response.

These failures have allowed this disease to spread. 31 cases in May quickly turned into 650 cases in June, more than 6,000 cases in July, more than 12,000 cases in August, and near 22,000 so far in September.

It should have been obvious to all of you that the timing of early cases, coupled with evidence that the cases were not linked, would create a perfect storm for a large outbreak.

Monkeypox is a virus that largely transmits through skin-to-skin contact, most easily and frequently transmitted between sexual partners.

Monkeypox arrived just before pride celebrations across the country and after two years of lockdowns and social distancing. Your agencies should have been screaming from the rooftops about what you knew or suspected about how monkeypox spread. Instead, you remained silent. And people got sick because of your silence.

This isn't rocket science.

But consenting adults need to be told what behavior changes they should consider to avoid getting a preventable disease like monkeypox.

You failed at a time when the communities most at risk needed you.

Disease control and prevention and preparedness and response is literally in the name of two of your agencies, yet you did none of that.

It was no surprise to me that the Administration, after months of floundering, appointed a new czar at the White House to coordinate the response. It shows why this committee passed the PREVENT Pandemics Act to create a mission control. The Secretary of HHS has been totally absent, and, when he has been involved, it only seems to make matters worse.

But new, ad hoc groups within government are exactly the problem. We need a consistent and coherent government-wide response to be effective, and that can only be led at the White House. I hope that in the coming weeks we will be able to get that legislation over the finish line and I'll commit to spending my remaining weeks in the Senate doing everything I can to help the White House set that new office up with a lasting mission and clear agenda.

If I were not retiring, I would spend the next several years conducting a thorough examination of each of your agencies, highlighting each and every one of the systemic and bureaucratic failures that we have now seen in response after response and demand accountability for the American people.

It isn't a question of authority; you have the authority. It isn't a question of money; you have been given astonishing amounts of money.

It's a question of leadership. It's a question of focus. It's a question of squashing the typical bureaucratic roadblocks, arrogance, and ineptitude.

You need to do better.

We learned in Operation Warp Speed that when you press outside the box, when you focus on public private partnerships, when you get bureaucracy tamed so that it serves the American people and doesn't try to control them, we can actually make government work.

I'd ask you for your plan, but you don't have one. I'd ask you what you'd change, but your agencies seem to think they are doing everything right. I'd ask who you are going to hold accountable, but failures at each of your agencies show that you don't believe in that type of accountability.

So instead, I'll just express my outrage and hope that eventually we'll get people in your agencies who will do their job to protect the American people instead of protecting their bureaucracies.

Closing

Before I close, I want to address a serious issue. The last time we were here there was a coordinated assault, pretending that somehow Republicans were at fault for there not being a deal on additional pandemic money.

But let's revisit some facts for a moment.

The Senate, on a bipartisan basis, actually passed extra funding for COVID, 15.6 billion dollars in the March omnibus for testing, treatments, vaccines, and global aid, but the Speaker of the House either couldn't pass that legislation or

didn't think pandemic money was a priority, so she stripped it. I've worked with her for a long time and I'm pretty sure she's a Democrat.

Then Senators Romney, Blunt, and myself engaged in deep negotiations with the Majority Leader and the Chair of this committee, and we reached a second deal for \$10 billion in domestic funding for COVID, but the Majority Leader didn't want to take a vote against lifting COVID restrictions on the southern border, probably because he knew it would pass, so the deal was killed. I'm pretty sure he's a Democrat.

So then at our last hearing, the Chair, and each of you, got together and pretended that somehow Republicans were at fault.

Republicans tried twice to provide additional funding for COVID, but Democrats couldn't take yes for an answer.

Then last month, Democrats conducted a partisan spending exercise where Republicans weren't even in the room. They dramatically raised taxes by hundreds of billions of dollars, provided funding for 87,000 IRS bureaucrats to audit the middle class, and spent hundreds of billions on the green new deal that will mostly benefit billionaires and millionaires.

Those same Democrats who complain about no new COVID spending didn't spend one dime of those new taxes on pandemic response.

I often hear my colleagues say that your budget shows your priorities, but Democrats had the power to spend money on the pandemic and chose not to. I guess making energy more expensive was more important.

I've had in my jacket a pocket card with four simple requests for this Administration, and told them that was all I needed to help me get my Republican colleagues to secure more pandemic funding. I've shared it time and time again, here, with my colleagues, and with the press.

1. A detailed plan
2. A detailed accounting of where previous money has been spent
3. Offsets to match any new spending on the pandemic, and
4. A simple vote on ending COVID restrictions at the border

To date the Administration has failed to deliver. Maybe they don't want actual transparency on what they have spent or maybe they don't want to come clean to the American people what their plans are until after the election.

But to plan ahead and blame Republicans when we've come to the table twice already is disappointing and I hope it doesn't happen here again today.

This would be a good place to quote Matthew Chapter 7, verse 5 to you, but I'll just simply say that if anyone isn't serious about funding pandemics it seems to be this administration and their Democratic allies in Congress.

I yield back.