

Prepared Statement of Ranking Member Richard Burr
An Update from Federal Officials on Efforts to Combat COVID-19

May 11, 2021

Chair Murray, I am glad that we are holding another hearing to update us on the status of the COVID-19 response.

To our witnesses, welcome back.

It has been almost 18 months since the initial reports of a severe pneumonia from Wuhan, China surfaced.

Since that time, we have tragically seen over half a million deaths in this country from COVID-19. Government-backed shutdowns have jeopardized the livelihoods of millions of Americans and we have spent more taxpayer funds than I could have ever imagined in response to this virus and the devastating effect it has had on our economy.

But now, more than ever, there is reason for hope. We are seeing the promise of vaccines and treatments in real time.

A month ago, the case counts in the United States were averaging 70,000 new cases per day, now they are down to 40,000.

CDC is projecting continued declines in death and hospitalization rates.

Because of Operation Warp Speed and Stephen Hahn and FDA, we have fully vaccinated 115 million Americans, which is roughly 44 percent of adults, and delivered almost 330 million vaccine doses to states.

Warp Speed and BARDA spent more than \$18 billion to make vaccines available to Americans, manufacturing vaccines at-risk – and the American people are benefitting from that.

Manufacturers were able to produce enough vaccine that the U.S. is now able to help provide vaccines to countries in need, countries like India.

Because of the collaborative efforts over the last year, we are ready to turn the corner.

The partnerships developing and manufacturing the COVID-19 vaccines have been one of the biggest scientific success stories in generations.

Industry answered the call at the start of the pandemic and partnered in unprecedented ways to bring us these life-saving products.

Intellectual property protections are part of the reason we have these life-saving products. If these protections are not in place for innovators of life-saving medicines, we will not have them for the next pandemic. It's that simple.

We held a hearing on the threat of China taking intellectual property from U.S. research, and now the Biden administration has agreed to just hand it over.

There is a way to support the manufacturing for vaccines globally and to help countries in need without acting in bad faith against innovators who stepped up when the world needed them most.

It's the partnerships we are already seeing today that are saving lives, not silly ideas about socializing the means of production.

The action from the Biden administration to support waiving intellectual property rights will undermine the innovation we are relying on to bring this pandemic to an end and will leave us less prepared in the future.

I'm encouraged that some of our European allies are cautioning against this reckless action, and I hope that the adults in the Biden Administration will realize that what sounds good in a grad school ivory tower thesis paper doesn't make sense in the real world.

You four are supposed to be the adults in the room, and I urge each you to think about those real consequences if we just give away this science and technology.

The next part of our job is going to be difficult.

I have been looking to Israel to help predict the challenges that may be in store for the U.S., since they are ahead of our vaccination rates today. Israel was able to vaccinate 40 percent of its adult population by the end of February. Their data shows that uptake stalled once they vaccinated about 60% of the adult

population. While there are differences between our countries, we have to use the information we've got to best predict our road ahead.

Every adult has the opportunity to be vaccinated, and supply is starting to exceed the demand. We have more shots than arms. We need to address vaccine hesitancy.

I know this is the case in my state, with recent reports from Wilmington, that local officials are changing their approach as vaccine demand slows.

We must paint the picture for Americans showing the benefits of both a vaccine, and of reopening our country.

This is a simple message for those of us in leadership positions.

I got the vaccine, my wife got it, my sons and their wives got it. I have encouraged all of my staff to take it as soon as they can.

I would guess that everyone in this room is vaccinated, which means if we follow the CDC guidance we can dispense with masks and social distancing.

I hope in the near future this leads to a return to normal life, full reopening of our economy, more in person hearings, and a day when we are no longer wearing masks for average, daily activities.

Very soon we will have a vaccine for kids over 12, and one for younger children hopefully as soon as this fall.

We must reassure Americans that the COVID vaccine is safe. Vaccines save lives. And we must reassure Americans that if you get a COVID vaccine, our lives will return to normal.

Today's response is preparing us for tomorrow's threat.

Recently Sen. Murray and I launched a joint effort to strengthen our public health preparedness programs for the next threat we will inevitably face.

That threat could be an emerging or new virus, another curveball from Mother Nature, or the result of a deliberate, man-made attack on our country.

Our framework has always been flexible, and it needs to stay that way.

There will always be lessons that we learn from each response, and our threat landscape is constantly evolving.

Our experience with this pandemic has made that even more clear.

Senator Murray, I am looking forward to working with you and the members of the Committee on this project to take stock of lessons learned and put them into action.

To our witnesses today, thank you for all you have done so far during this response. Let's learn from it for the next one.