

Chairman Roy Blunt Opening Statement
Senate Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human
Services, Education, and Related Agencies

Hearing Titled “Review of Operation Warp Speed: Researching, Manufacturing, &
Distributing a Safe & Effective Coronavirus Vaccine”

July 2, 2020

(As prepared for delivery)

Good morning. I want to thank our witnesses for appearing before the Subcommittee today to discuss the development of a coronavirus vaccine.

This is the first Appropriations Committee hearing that is being held both in-person and virtually. We are virtual because the United States is currently experiencing its worse, large-scale public health outbreak in a generation. Across the country, this has changed our daily lives, and in the Senate, it is no different. Yesterday, new coronavirus cases in the US passed 50,000 for the first time to reach a single-day record. As of this morning, 128,000 Americans have died and nearly 2.7 million have tested positive for COVID-19. My thoughts are with all those affected.

I called today’s hearing to receive an update on the Administration’s efforts to develop a COVID-19 vaccine through Operation Warp Speed.

The mantra underlying this pandemic is that we need a vaccine to truly get this pandemic under control.

And I think that is right – that life will not return to resembling pre-outbreak normal until there is an effective and widely available coronavirus vaccine. But how do we get there?

Developing the right vaccine, putting it through its necessary clinical trials to see if it is both safe and effective takes time. Then it must be manufactured, distributed, and administered to potentially hundreds of millions of Americans. These are daunting steps that have already received significant investment by the federal government, and will likely need more, to achieve.

It is important to manage our expectations, to understand that as much as we want a vaccine as soon as possible, the most important thing is that it is safe.

The Administration should be commended for their new initiative, Operation Warp Speed. This Committee has provided nearly \$10 billion for this effort and the vast majority of this investment will support the research and development of vaccines and treatments.

There are over 100 vaccines in development worldwide and Operation Warp Speed will narrow

down those candidates to about 7 to advance into clinical trials and for further development. Importantly, as NIH and the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority continue to oversee the development of these vaccines, we will also provide resources to begin manufacturing now.

This will allow us to have hundreds of millions of doses ready to go when a vaccine is determined to be safe and effective.

As we saw earlier this year with diagnostic testing research at NIH, the current processes can be streamlined to make them faster. Just because something is new, doesn't make it better. But the opposite is also true – just because that's the way something has always been, it doesn't make it right.

Under NIH's Shark Tank program, which is fast-tracking more COVID-19 diagnostic tests to the market, NIH was able to start a new research program that would probably take a year to design and implement before the pandemic and do it in only a month. In the first 24 hours, they had 400 inquiries. As of this week, they had 542 applications.

Unfortunately, for political reasons or not, Operation Warp Speed immediately had its detractors.

Some warned that the timeline to develop a vaccine by early next year was too fast. Others said that by accelerating the process, regulatory corners will be cut. Still others said that there will be pressure to release a vaccine before the election even if clinical trials are not complete. I understand these concerns and that is exactly why I wanted to have today's hearing.

This is an opportunity for our distinguished panel of witnesses to explain to the American people how the development process works, how they will ensure that a vaccine will be safe, even with an accelerated research and development timeline, and how a vaccine will be distributed across the country as quickly as possible.

The other issue this hearing must tackle is that, just because we have an effective vaccine, doesn't mean Americans will take it. A poll by the Associated Press found 31 percent of Americans weren't sure if they would take a COVID-19 vaccine if one was offered. Another one in five said they'd outright refuse. This is going to be a huge hurdle for us as a nation to overcome.

Despite extraordinary victories fighting devastating diseases like smallpox and polio through vaccination campaigns – we don't even vaccinate for smallpox in the US anymore because the vaccine was so successful – too many have forgotten or are unaware of the havoc that these diseases played on the world before vaccines became available to combat them.

It is concerning to think that future generations who did not live through the coronavirus pandemic may think of the vaccine as more problematic than the disease.

I hope today's hearing allays some of these concerns by providing clear answers on the steps ahead. Americans need to be reassured that the government will not distribute a vaccine that is not safe.

This hearing should allow us all to have a better understanding of where the vaccine development process stands. How far are we really from an effective vaccine? What are we doing to ensure we're manufacturing enough vaccines to stop the pandemic worldwide?

What investments have already been made and what might taxpayers be asked to support in the coming months? And what is the plan to distribute the vaccine once we have one?

These are incredibly important issues that this Subcommittee has invested \$9.5 billion toward.

Will it succeed? It is too soon to tell. Will some of the vaccine candidates fail? Of course. In science, there is never a straight line to success. But we know we have to invest in this process for success to occur.

I look forward to our panel's testimonies and appreciate your dialogue with us. Thank you.