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Subcommittee Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Pandemic Response: Confronting the Unequal Impacts of COVID-19

July 10, 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic did not create health disparities in this country. Instead, the pandemic is further exposing these disparities and their tragic effects on minority and disadvantaged communities. Today's hearing provides an opportunity to examine the Federal response to the pandemic and what must be done to confront the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic in these communities.

In March, FEMA was tasked with being the lead Federal agency for COVID-19 response. I have been concerned about FEMA's past emergency response efforts, where it failed to adequately address the needs of minority and economically disadvantaged communities. The complexities of a pandemic put this troubling history in starker view.

In April 2020, FEMA published a new Civil Rights Bulletin intended to ensure civil rights during the COVID-19 response. While the publication is an encouraging step, continued Congressional oversight of the Agency's efforts and operations is necessary to ensure response efforts provide equitable assistance to minorities and economically disadvantaged communities.

Of course, direction to FEMA and the entire Federal government on pandemic response flows from the top down. Unfortunately, President Trump's response to the worsening pandemic has been a failure by any reasonable measure. Failure to address minority and economic health disparities is a significant part of the shortcoming. The Administration has even struggled to provide policymakers with COVID-19 case and morbidity data outcomes by race and ethnicity. In fact, it took pressure from Members of Congress and the public for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to release its first nationwide preliminary case and morbidity estimates by race and ethnicity on June 15, 2020, well into the pandemic.

Though the data is still incomplete, CDC's estimates suggest what many non-governmental reports already show – African Americans, Latinos, Indigenous people, and Alaska Natives are disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Communities of color and the economically disadvantaged have had to contend not only with a deadly virus and failed Federal response, but also the systemic inequities that put these communities at greater risk for COVID-19-related hospitalization and death.

On April 29, 2020, every Democratic Member of this Committee sent a letter to the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General (OIG), requesting they look at this issue and ways the Federal government can better address health disparities in emergencies. I look forward to the Inspector General's findings on our request.

Today, I am pleased we are joined by our distinguished witnesses today. I hope we have a frank discussion about how the Federal government can do more to include communities of color and the economically disadvantaged in its preparation, response, and recovery efforts for COVID-19 and other emergencies.

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