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

Examining the National Response to a Worsening Pandemic: Part II

July 22, 2020

Two weeks ago, the Committee heard from State and local officials about how the Trump Administration's failure to respond to the pandemic has harmed their communities and our Nation.

We invited FEMA Administrator Peter Gaynor to that hearing, but he declined to attend based on White House guidance prohibiting Administration witnesses from appearing before Congress remotely. To be clear, that self-imposed "guidance" is intended to undermine congressional oversight of the Administration, but the Committee will move forward with its work today.

I would note that the Committee also invited the Department of Health and Human Services to participate in this hearing. HHS refused to send a witness even though the Committee scheduled this in-person hearing to accommodate the Administration's request. That refusal is yet another example of the Trump Administration shirking its responsibility to answer to Congress and the American people on its bungled response to COVID-19.

That being said, we are pleased that Administrator Gaynor is here to respond to Members' questions about the pandemic, which has now claimed the lives of over 140,000 Americans. The number of U.S. coronavirus cases continues to surge, with 60,000 new cases yesterday. The country recorded more than 1,000 coronavirus deaths in a single day yesterday, for the first time in July.

Nations around the world like Canada, Australia, Japan, Korea, and many in Europe have managed to bring their outbreaks under control through coordinated responses, consistent messaging, and measures such as face coverings, testing, and contact tracing. But here at home, the Trump Administration's response to the coronavirus has been an abject failure, and the American people have suffered the consequences. The President's gross incompetence and incoherent plan to respond to the pandemic has cost lives.

South Korea reported its first COVID-19 case the same day as the United States, but we have suffered 470 times the number of deaths they have. Tragically, in many ways we are no more prepared now to address the pandemic today than we were at its outset.

We still have a shortage of medical supplies and equipment, like masks, gowns, and gloves. Wait times for COVID-19 test results are climbing. And most alarmingly, there is an urgent demand for ICU beds in states where the virus is spinning out of control. Doctors and nurses in the greatest country on earth should not have to plead for the essentials they need to save lives and protect their own.

Just yesterday, months into the pandemic, after repeated calls for face coverings from doctors and scientists in his own Administration, the President finally called on Americans to wear masks. We are hoping this is an indication President Trump may, at long last, be willing to take the advice of the experts on responding to the pandemic. We need real leadership at the Federal level if our country is to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic and prevent more lives being lost needlessly.

Administrator Gaynor and his agency have a Herculean task ahead, in many ways made all the more difficult by the President himself. Today, our hearing is not about blaming China for the Trump Administration's failures to take care of its own people. Frankly, we do not have time for such ridiculous attempts to distract from the crisis at hand.

Instead, I hope to hear from Administrator Gaynor today about where we currently stand and how the Administration can improve its response to this public health emergency. The American people are counting on us.

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