



# COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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

### *Confronting the Coronavirus: Perspectives on the COVID-19 Pandemic One Year Later* February 24, 2021

Almost one year ago, on March 4, 2020, the Committee on Homeland Security held the first congressional hearing to examine the novel coronavirus that had begun spreading around the world. A week later, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Since then, over half a million Americans have died from the virus – a tragic, catastrophic loss of life.

In remembrance of those we have lost to COVID-19, I ask the Committee to observe a moment of silence. Thank you.

The Committee is meeting today to examine “Perspectives on the COVID-19 Pandemic One Year Later.” We are fortunate to be joined today by witnesses representing two of the same organizations that came before this Committee at our March 2020 hearing, and I look forward to resuming our discussion. Examining the failures in the Federal responses so far and applying lessons learned is essential to ending the pandemic and keeping Americans safe.

Unfortunately, President Trump ignored intelligence on COVID-19, made States compete for PPE and testing supplies, rejected science on masking and distancing, silenced medical and scientific experts in his own Administration, and failed to develop comprehensive plans for testing and vaccine distribution. The American people have paid dearly for those failures and continue to do so today, in some cases with their lives.

Late last month, the Government Accountability Office released a scathing report on the Trump Administration’s persistent failure to address critical problems in its COVID-19 response. Nearly 90 percent of GAO’s recommendations remained unimplemented as President Trump left office, leaving the normally reserved government watchdog agency “deeply troubled.”

Among the most significant failures identified was the lack of a comprehensive plan for COVID vaccine distribution. According to GAO, without a plan each state was left to create its own plan for “locally distributing the shots and launching programs for getting them into people’s arms.” We all know how that has gone.

Long waits for appointments at under-resourced local public health departments, older people trying to navigate a patchwork of overwhelmed private pharmacy websites to get a shot, and minority and underserved communities being left behind despite suffering disproportionate illness and deaths from the virus. This is the situation the Biden Administration was handed by its predecessor.

President Biden is taking aggressive action to try to rectify these failures and bring the pandemic under control, but it will be no easy task. Executing his National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness will take a coordinated effort among Federal, State, local, tribal, and territorial governments and private sector partners.

I hope to hear from our witnesses today about how Congress can be helpful in that critical endeavor. Getting the pandemic under control will also take addressing the disproportionate toll COVID-19 has taken on minority and underserved communities. The risk of dying from COVID is nearly seven times higher for Hispanics and five-and-half times higher for African Americans than for others. Yet, minority and underserved communities are having trouble accessing life-saving COVID vaccines.

In my state of Mississippi, only 20 percent of vaccines have gone to African Americans, even though African Americans comprise 38 percent of the state's population. In one Mississippi county, less than 9 percent of vaccines have gone to African Americans even though 26 percent of residents are African American. President Biden's Executive Order and Task Force on COVID-19 Health Equity are a good start, but more needs to be done to ensure equitable vaccine access and outcomes.

I was heartened to hear of the creation of a Civil Rights Advisory Group within FEMA that will be working on this issue, and Americans can be assured this Committee will be conducting close oversight of their work and supporting their efforts. The Federal government is paying for these vaccines with taxpayer money, and it must ensure that all Americans have equitable access to them.

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