



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Emergency Preparedness, Response, & Recovery Subcommittee Chairman Donald Payne Jr. (D-NJ)

Pandemic Response: Confronting the Unequal Impacts of COVID-19

July 10, 2020

Our nation is facing a crisis of unprecedented proportions. The novel coronavirus pandemic has already infected over three million and killed well over one hundred thousand Americans. The scale of loss is staggering and efforts to produce a life-saving vaccine continue. But not all Americans have been impacted equally.

Communities of color are not only more likely to be infected by COVID-19, but they are also more likely to be killed by the virus. In my home state of New Jersey, African Americans disproportionately make up the COVID-19 fatalities. This disturbing trend is observed not only in New Jersey but also across the nation. Data from the CDC shows that African Americans and Hispanic populations are three times as likely to be infected and twice as likely to die from COVID-19 than white populations. This Administration's response to the outbreak has been an utter failure on multiple levels. Nowhere is this more acute than in its neglect of minority health.

Since the onset of the outbreak, it has been clear that communities of color are disproportionately impacted. However, the impacts on these communities have been obscured by critical data gaps. Even with this knowledge, the Administration has been painfully slow in setting requirements for the collection of racial and ethnic demographic information on COVID-19 infections.

This example is just one of many that demonstrate the Administration's lackluster outbreak response, especially when it comes to minority health. Even CDC director Dr. Robert Redfield admitted the failures of the Administration to collect demographic information on COVID-19 infections and deaths in an apology at another Congressional hearing last month. I would say to Dr. Redfield that the American people need more than that.

While much of the focus of the Administration's response to minority health during the pandemic is centered around the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is playing a vital role as the lead Federal agency for response. Americans are counting on FEMA to get it right.

Unfortunately, FEMA has had costly missteps in the past when it comes to not factoring in the needs of communities of color and researchers have continuously found that FEMA's recovery programs exacerbate existing disparities. And while these disparities long precede COVID-19, the effect they are having on minority communities is a national emergency in itself—one I worry that FEMA is not doing enough to meet.

As we speak lives are being lost in the country to long-standing health inequities and that is unacceptable. At today's hearing, I hope we can explore this problem and hear potential solutions from our panel of experts.

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Media contact: Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978