

Viohl & Associates Highlights: “No Time to Lose: Solutions to Increase COVID-19 Vaccinations in the States”

Overview

On February 2, 2021, the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce held a hearing to discuss how to increase the rate of COVID-19 vaccinations in the states. The subcommittee heard testimony from Dr. Ngozi Ezike, director of the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH); Dr. Joneigh Khaldun, chief medical executive and chief deputy director of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS); Dr. Clay Marsh, vice president and executive dean for health sciences at West Virginia University and West Virginia COVID-19 czar; Dr. Courtney Philips, secretary of the Louisiana Department of Health (LDH), and; Jill Hunsaker Ryan, executive director of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE). These public health experts covered a variety of topics related to COVID-19 vaccinations, including how to improve the speed and efficiency of vaccine delivery, vaccine equity, strategies to support state public health officials’ efforts, and the future of the vaccine rollout. A full recording of this hearing can be found online on the House Energy & Commerce Committee’s [website](#).

Opening Statements

In her [opening statement](#), **Subcommittee Chair Diana DeGette of Colorado** criticized the previous administration’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, arguing the Trump administration insufficiently prepared for a vaccine rollout during the months where vaccines were being approved. She explained the subcommittee is now aiming to oversee the Biden administration’s efforts to ensure equitable and expeditious distribution of the available vaccines, and to help assist with the rollout by identifying and addressing challenges including misinformation, lack of vaccine supply, and the mistrust of the government. **Energy and Commerce Committee Chair Frank Pallone of New Jersey** echoed Rep. DeGette’s criticism of the Trump administration and said that he hoped he could work with Republican colleagues to deliver an aggressive federal plan to crush the COVID-19 pandemic and deliver comprehensive aid to states.

In his opening statement (not available online), **Subcommittee Ranking Member H. Morgan Griffith of Virginia** said states should be acknowledged, not criticized, for their efforts to quickly vaccinate their populations. He cheered the effectiveness of Operation Warp Speed in delivering several viable vaccines quickly, and stressed the importance of supporting states’ experimental efforts to boost vaccination rates. He said that as states face challenges in their vaccination efforts, the federal government should be responsive to their needs and prioritize cooperation between state and federal governments. He also said the federal government should be aware of and address any supply constraints.

Testimony Highlights

Click here for the full written testimony of [Dr. Ezike \(IDPH\)](#), [Dr. Khaldun \(MDHHS\)](#), [Dr. Marsh](#), [Dr. Philips \(LDH\)](#), and [Ms. Hunsaker Ryan \(CDPHE\)](#).

Improving the Speed and Efficiency of Vaccine Administration

Witnesses’ testimony primarily focused on ways to improve the speed and efficiency of vaccine delivery, distribution, and administration. Witnesses suggested steps the federal government could take, including:

- Developing a comprehensive national vaccination strategy;
- Addressing vaccine supply shortages;
- Communicating clear and consistent projections to states about vaccine supplies and ongoing efforts by the federal government;
- Modernizing vaccination data infrastructure, and;
- Providing enhanced federal funding and other forms of aid to states by passing a relief bill.

Addressing Vaccine Equity

Witnesses also spoke to the importance of prioritizing equity in vaccine distribution. They stressed that vaccine equity is not only a moral concern, but also an efficacy concern, since inequitable distribution of vaccinations can cause issues in vaccine uptake and drive case rates higher. Witnesses’ commentary reflected that an

equitable vaccination strategy should prioritize the most at-risk members of society first, and also focus on historically marginalized populations that face the most severe health disparities. Witnesses acknowledged that more must be done to enable equitable vaccine distribution and encourage vaccine uptake. They shared lessons learned from their home states and suggested that the federal and state governments should prioritize engaging communities of vulnerable populations, employ a diverse group of vaccine providers, and be proactive and clear in combatting vaccine misinformation.

Supporting States

Witnesses noted that states often struggled during the past year of the pandemic. Some witnesses explained that their state public health departments are generally underfunded and underequipped to handle to the monumental effort of a speedy vaccine rollout. To better support states, witnesses suggested that the federal government should provide state public health departments with additional supplemental funding, build relationships with officials in state health departments, communicate more clearly, and procure as many additional crucial supplies (i.e. personal protective equipment, vaccine doses, vaccine syringes, etc.) for states as possible.

The Future of the Vaccine Rollout

Moving forward, witnesses stressed it will be important to keep in place precautionary measures to fight the virus and keep case rates down during the final months of the pandemic. Going forward, witnesses hoped that more vaccine doses will be quickly made available to the states for distribution, and that the federal government will take states' calls for aid (i.e. additional funding and national strategy and supply coordination) seriously. All the witnesses believed that with adequate support from the federal government, states could lead successful efforts to oversee vaccination efforts unprecedented in speed and efficiency.

Subcommittee Members' Questions

Subcommittee members' questions mostly centered on themes covered earlier in this summary. Democratic members' questions highlighted themes including vaccine equity, improving communication between the federal and state governments, and addressing vaccine hesitancy. Democratic members also frequently criticized the Trump administration's pandemic response. Republican members tended to highlight the successes of Operation Warp Speed in their questioning, asking witnesses to describe how the plan enabled their states to quickly deliver vaccine doses to vulnerable populations. Several Republican members suggested that criticism of the Trump administration's vaccine rollout was unfounded. Democrats and Republicans agreed that the vaccine was developed with unprecedented speed and efficiency under Operation Warp Speed, and cheered the efforts of the scientists who developed the vaccines and the state officials who are quickly distributing doses. Republican and Democratic members both signaled their intention to work collaboratively to bring a faster end to the pandemic.

Subcommittee Chair DeGette concluded the hearing by thanking the witnesses and assuring them that their suggestions would be taken into consideration going forward.