

Prepared Statement of Ranking Member Richard Burr

Examining Our COVID-19 Response: Using Lessons Learned to Address Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders

April 28, 2021

Chair Murray, thank you for holding this hearing today.

Over the last year, we put in place measures to slow the spread of a novel coronavirus.

This new virus quickly escalated from an outbreak in China to a pandemic that has challenged countries around the world, including the United States.

While these measures were put in place to ensure our health systems could weather the storm, these measures and the pandemic have, in many ways, asked so much of Americans.

Families with critically ill and dying loved ones have not been able to visit parents, grandparents, and siblings, instead saying their goodbyes over a screen.

This has compounded the grief for so many and taken a tremendous toll on health care professionals.

Sacrificing simple acts like hugging our family members and neighbors and feeling a sense of purpose when we walk into the office every day have consequences on our mental health.

A year of sitting 6 feet apart, canceling weddings and holidays, and adjusting to remote school has had an effect on the wellbeing of all of us.

We must continue to examine these effects as a part of our review of the COVID-19 response.

Our current Surgeon General has written a lot about the effects of loneliness. He has explained that this lack of human connection can lead to depression, anxiety, and chronic conditions like heart disease and dementia.

It is no surprise to me that, after a year of being apart, we are seeing the heartbreaking effects of this separation and sacrifice.

Prior to the pandemic, experts estimated one in four adults in the United States had a mental health disorder, and we were also in the midst responding to an opioid crisis.

The need to respond to these challenges continued during COVID-19.

Reaching people and providing care required innovative approaches from doctors, nurses, other health care providers around the country.

I look forward to hearing about some of those solutions from our witnesses today.

We are a resilient country. I believe that the most important action we can take to help people is to reopen as much of our country as quickly and safely as possible.

Bring hope back to Americans. Let neighbors celebrate birthdays and milestones, and let students see and interact with their peers.

My state of North Carolina has taken important steps in this process, announcing plans to lift COVID restrictions on June 1, if our metrics continue to show progress against the virus.

Vaccination rates are a key metric.

We have got to look at the next few weeks and months down the road to address the next phase of the response – getting more shots into arms.

The return of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is an important part of that, and I am glad that the CDC and FDA finally reaffirmed the safety and efficacy of that shot. But I worry that the ham-handed way they handled this has led to even more vaccine hesitancy.

Americans should all know that the benefits of using this vaccine far outweigh its potential risks.

Now, with 37 percent of adult Americans vaccinated, we are seeing the demand slow.

So, painting a picture of the benefits of all three vaccines, Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson and Johnson, will be important in driving down our infection rate and improving our chances for recovery.

Getting people back to work is a big part of that picture. And we can't do that until children are back in daycare and school.

The reopening of our restaurants, ballparks, and small businesses mean more opportunities for Americans to return to activities they love, but it also means more jobs, and more opportunities to restore livelihoods.

We invited the witnesses here with us today because they have seen the mental health effects of the pandemic and the response in their communities first hand.

But also, because they have raised their hands with local solutions.

I look forward to hearing more about those solutions today and how they can help to accelerate our country's broader recovery from COVID.

Our message, and the message of this administration, should be that we will have teachers and students safely back in the classroom this fall, that main street is open, Thanksgiving plans are on the books, and that this summer, you can attend a baseball game – even if things look a little different.

I thank the chair.