

Prepared Statement of Ranking Member Richard Burr
Addressing New Variants: A Federal Perspective on the COVID-19 Response

January 11, 2022

Thank you, Senator Murray. To our witnesses, welcome back.

Today is going to be a tough hearing, but the American people deserve accountability and transparency.

I appreciate that you all have cleared your schedules to allow for multiple rounds of questions today.

Next week marks one year of this Administration. It also marks two years since the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in the U.S.

President Biden said his first, second, and third priorities would be bringing us out of the COVID-19 pandemic, and that his team would “shut down the virus.”

This Administration was lucky. It started off on day one with the tools to change the trajectory of our COVID response.

Operation Warp Speed worked with the private sector to bring us groundbreaking vaccines and treatments – in record time.

Although we had a very bumpy start with testing early in the pandemic, we successfully built strong partnerships with the private sector to support the development and manufacturing of more tests.

State and local leaders were rising to the challenge of testing and vaccinating their citizens.

There was reason for hope.

Instead, now a full year later, here is where we are:

More than 830,000 deaths caused by COVID-19, the majority of which have occurred during this Administration, despite having many tools and significant resources from Congress, including \$80 billion for testing.

A variant is now spreading out of control across the country, with places like Washington, D.C. seeing a staggering increase in case counts over the holidays, and now my state of North Carolina is following suit, with a 319 percent increase as of yesterday.

Over the holidays, when Americans were instructed to do the responsible thing and get a test to see their loved ones, there were no tests on the shelves or online, and hours-long lines were the norm at testing sites across the country. The testing situation was worse when many sought tests to safely return to work and school.

And the most vulnerable Americans who contracted the virus could not get the treatments designed to help them because those are now in short supply, too.

This Administration has time and again squandered its opportunities and made things worse in the decisions you've made on testing and treatments and most crucially in communicating with the American people.

The American people are right to be confused when it seems like you all don't even talk amongst yourselves.

Some examples:

Last August, the President announced that boosters would be available by the week of September 20th. Three of you signed that statement.

But neither the FDA nor the CDC had yet approved boosters when the President made that promise.

And when you went to your advisory panels with a predetermined outcome already made, those independent experts pushed back and ultimately had to be overridden to meet the President's goal on boosters.

I know the data shows that boosters are necessary. I'm boosted myself. I want everyone to get vaccinated and boosted. The facts about the value of vaccines and boosters are crystal clear.

But the way this Administration rolled out boosters was a disaster. You created confusion, skepticism and mass confusion.

Example 2: Last summer, the President dramatically announced that CDC recommendations changed so that vaccinated Americans didn't need to wear

masks indoors, implying that the worst of the pandemic was behind us, even as the Delta variant was exploding in India.

Only after Delta hit America did the CDC begin to take it seriously, and the Administration had to change course.

Example 3: Last week, when Dr. Fauci said that the CDC was going to update its guidance on quarantine, he left the American people with the impression that CDC's guidance was going to include a testing component to reduce the quarantine to five days.

But when the CDC did update its guidance there wasn't a testing requirement.

Again, I'm not questioning the science. I'm glad you refrained from a testing mandate. But I'm questioning your communication strategies.

It's no wonder the American people are confused.

When the President announced on December 21st that 500 million tests were going to be purchased, he left out that the contract wasn't going to be signed for weeks, and it would take even longer for all of those tests to materialize.

Immediately, other experts and medical professionals were asking what the value of just one-and-a-half tests per person was when CDC's own guidance says that you need multiple at-home tests to be assured of the results.

Yesterday, the Administration mandated that insurers now cover the 170 million Americans that are covered by private insurance. They must cover up to eight tests per person, per month. That would be 16 billion tests and we have 500 million today that are aspirationally contracted for.

It's still unclear when these tests will be available, how to get them, and whether any more are on their way.

But it's especially frustrating that the White House Press Secretary had previously mocked the very idea of doing what the President later announced. In a sarcastic and withering tone when this was first proposed, she had four questions: whether we should just send one to every American? Then what happens? How much does that cost? What happens after that?

Those are all good questions that remain unanswered by this Administration.

My final example, though there are many more to choose from, happened last week too.

The White House Press Secretary, a repeat offender in poor communication, was asked about boosters. The Press Secretary said, and I quote – “They can get boosted now, *regardless* of what the CDC guidance is, whether you were just approved for the booster or you were approved weeks ago.” End quote

Regardless of what the CDC guidance is.

From the White House podium.

And then I was amazed when I got home Sunday and I had this letter from Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services telling me that as a Medicare beneficiary that I'm eligible to get a free vaccine booster. Five months after the President announced we are going to have boosters, this is the first communication from CMS that I've gotten as a Medicare beneficiary in the two years of COVID. And, all the sudden I get a request to get boosted.

When the former president and his advisors were so cavalier about the CDC my friends on the other side of the aisle found it to be a national disgrace.

When a Republican governor or senator, including some on this committee, suggest concern about CDC guidance, Twitter and MSNBC can't react fast enough with scorn and anger.

So, it can't come as a surprise that there is confusion and anger when your own White House says to ignore the CDC guidance.

I tell my staff, as I've repeatedly said to you all in previous hearings, to look 30, 60, 90 days ahead. Look six months ahead. Look abroad and see what's happening in Asia, Europe, Africa, Israel, the UK, and elsewhere around the world. What do we need to anticipate?

At our hearing on July 20th, I warned that Delta would not be our last variant and pleaded with each of you to have a plan in place for the next mutation of the virus.

So, why was the Vice President surprised that Omicron came to our shores?

I will say it very clearly, so that the Administration does not, yet again, say they are surprised: viruses change. Viruses mutate. There will be more variants. They will come to America. Period.

I don't understand why, after tens of billions of federal dollars were given to you, this Administration has failed to ensure that Americans have the tests they need.

I don't understand why suddenly it's OK to take into account the economic and job impact of your guidance and recommendations.

You shortened the quarantine guidance because too many people would be out from work. Was that because of science or was it because you now know that lockdowns, shut downs, and school closures come with a significant downside impact?

You ask the American people to trust you, but you've lost that trust.

You need to earn it back.

I've asked you before: what's the plan?

The Administration has not responded to my letters. Maybe folks at the White House think they don't need to respond to Republican Senators, but I think my record shows that I'm approaching all of this as I have for 20 years. I'm trying to help you. I love this country and its people and I know we can do better.

You have to do better.

Maybe I'm wrong about this, maybe you'll tell me where I got it wrong.

Instead, I'm hoping that you'll understand that my criticism comes from a place of concern. Because your communication efforts are a mess and have only made things worse.

I'm at the end of my rope. I think you'll see today that most of my colleagues are as well. I have tried to give my best advice and share what we hear and see, because no one is paying attention to the messages from the Administration now.

Maybe today you'll respond to my request to learn what the plan is.

Hopefully, you'll take this as a challenge to rebuild that trust. Not just with me, not just with my colleagues, but with the American people we all serve.

What are you changing and fixing to restore confidence with the American people that there is a strategy for testing, for treatments, for fixing your communications strategy.

Because if you don't change, things will get worse before they get better.

I yield back.