

Prepared Statement of Ranking Member Richard Burr

“Examining Our COVID-19 Response: An Update from the Frontlines”

March 9, 2021

Thank you, Senator Murray and good morning to our witnesses. One year ago today there were 1,020 COVID cases in the United States and 35 people had died from complications from the disease. Since then, 28 million people have contracted COVID-19 in this country and more than 514,000 Americans have died from it. Globally, 116 million have contracted COVID and 2.5 million have died from this once-in-a-century pandemic.

This Committee has an awesome responsibility ahead of it. We must take stock of lessons learned from the response to the coronavirus pandemic and learn together to see what worked, what didn't, and what needs to be done to be more prepared in the future.

We should be proud of the important laws and programs and policies we have worked together to create and fund, because so much of it worked exactly as we envisioned. FDA used its emergency use authority to get vaccines and therapeutics to Americans in record time, while maintaining the gold standard of safety and efficacy. The Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response coordinated with health care providers on the ground to ensure the sharing of critical information and supplies as quickly as possible during the response, and

coordinated with the NIH and BARDA to kick our countermeasure development into high gear. Using BARDA's authorities, Operation Warp Speed developed and scaled manufacturing for multiple vaccines in record, life-saving time.

But we should also be humble enough to know that more needs to be done to be prepared for the future. I hope now that the partisan spending bill – that only had 5% of its funding dedicated to the public health portion of the COVID response and 1% of their massive spending bill dedicated to COVID vaccines – has passed, we can shift our attention back to working together.

As we start this thorough review process, it is important to remember that we are still in the midst of our current response. But the tools we have today look very different than where we started over one year ago, largely because of the authority we have given the executive branch. In May of last year, some experts were predicting that a vaccine could take years – in partnership with the private sector, we did it in ten months. Testing is now widely available, with the FDA announcing just last week the emergency authorization of another test that delivers results at home, thanks to the public private partnership and leadership from the NIH. Our doctors and nurses have found new and better ways to treat our sickest COVID patients, improving outcomes with better clinical practice guidelines, and our state and local officials have led the charge in tailoring our response to their communities' needs, as they should.

Alongside our successes, we must acknowledge our failures. At the beginning of the academic year, just 17 % of our nation's schools had fully returned to in-person learning, jeopardizing the future and potential of an entire generation of Americans. Businesses are still closed, with the National Restaurant Association estimating that 100,000 restaurants will not ever be back to welcome customers. And, the tool we have to solve these urgent problems – a vaccine – should be reaching more Americans, faster. The CDC stated that we are averaging 2 million shots in arms per day – but this Administration has not updated its goal to reach 100 million shots in 100 days, which was already the trajectory when the President took office in January. Instead, we should set aspirational goals, like we did with the development of the vaccine, not easily attainable ones.

When we look at where we are in the response today, the data shows a significant decline in COVID cases and hospitalizations. I share this with my colleagues, not because we should let-up on our response, but because I believe we are at the greatest moment, right now, to learn from our progress and our failures. The time to capture the lessons we are learning is now, in real time, and not months down the road when case levels are low, attention spans shorten, and urgency fades.

To our witnesses, welcome. Each of you have spent the last year in the thick of the COVID-19 response, a 24-hour, 7 day –a –week job. Thank you for your

tireless efforts. I hope we can learn from each of you today about what was most important during the early days of pandemic, the strategies that were most effective at the height of cases and deaths over the holidays, and the ways your response is changing as the vaccine is made available to more and more Americans.

Your input is critical as we begin to consider the next phase of the current response, and as we look to the next public health threat that we will face. It is not a matter of if, but of when, we will need to turn to the tools and policies we are using today, for yet another novel or emerging threat to our nation's health and its security. The questions I will raise to each of you today are – what did we get right, what did we get wrong, and what parts of our response were not part of the anticipated plan of action.

Throughout last year, this Committee held many bipartisan hearings and bipartisan briefings and we all spent countless time on calls and meetings with experts around the country. This was a wise decision, despite its logistical difficulties because it allowed us to begin to build the record necessary to move forward. This is our first hearing on the COVID response this Congress, and I look forward to working with you, Senator Murray, to make these hearings and these conversations a regular practice of the Committee. I know that we are in the process of securing Administration witnesses for a hearing in the near future, and I'd like to set the expectation for all of us on the committee, on both sides of the

aisle, that we should expect to hear from Administration officials on a regular basis just like we did with the last Administration, if not more often. They have an obligation to be open and transparent with Congress, and the American people about what they are doing, in real time, and I know all of my colleagues on both sides of the aisle will join us in that request.

I thank the Chairman.