



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY

Opening Statement

Chairman Bill Foster (D-IL)
of the Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight

Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight Hearing:
The New Normal: Preparing for and Adapting to the New Phase of COVID-19

March 31, 2022

Good morning, and welcome to our members and our panelists. Thank you for joining us for this hearing on preparing for the next phase of COVID-19. Over the past two years, this Subcommittee has held a number of hearings on the pandemic, often with an eye to how lessons learned now can pave an easier path through health crises to come. But the current fight against COVID-19 looks far different than it did in March 2020, and we must constantly evaluate how existing tools can meet our needs as case counts ebb and flow.

Fortunately, national COVID cases have been going down since the January omicron peak. After a difficult winter, where the death rate has surpassed the rate during the delta surge, spring has arrived.

Around the country, mask mandates have relaxed, schools have opened, and now I'm chairing this subcommittee hearing in person for the first time in two years. But we learned from previous lulls that we cannot expect this period to last forever. Now is the time to invest in research and infrastructure that can detect the next problematic variant as early as possible, determine what communities will be at high risk of surges, and implement protective measures and communication strategies to minimize incidence of severe and fatal infection.

Our witnesses here today exemplify the broad umbrella of COVID preparedness and response. Today we'll discuss the great strides that have been made in vaccines and therapeutics to prevent and treat COVID-19, and what more research must be done to ensure a robust response to future variants.

We'll talk about public receptiveness to behavioral mitigation measures, and how these tools can be scaled up and eased back based on the best available information.

We'll unpack what goes into that information – what metrics we must get better at collecting, and how we can most effectively analyze these metrics to determine relative risk level in our

communities. And we'll discuss how that information is best communicated at the individual level, to ensure that people are empowered with the facts and tools they need to protect themselves and their families.

Entering a new phase of the pandemic does not mean we've declared victory over the virus, nor does it mean we are resigning ourselves to a never-ending state of crisis.

The landscape has changed immensely in the past two years, and that is a testament to the incredible research that has been done into how the virus – and we – behave. Unfortunately, as public health guidance shifts to incorporate new information, it's all too often interpreted as being flaky and unreliable.

Changing recommendations regarding mask-wearing are looked at with skepticism, and research on vaccine efficacy in the face of new variants causes everything from cynicism to panic.

I am often struck by how Navigating through this crisis resembles the job of an ancient sea captain. A Captain should not be criticized for changing course as the wind shifts, but one who deliberately ignores signals of an approaching storm deserves no place at the helm. Today's fair weather may indicate the end of the storm, or we may simply be passing through the eye of the cyclone.

A captain will receive the advice of everyone from the grizzled old salts who have survived many stormy passages, to young seamen terrified of stories of sea monsters and falling off the edge of the flat earth.

And the captain must answer both to his investor's desire to get their cargo to market on time, and to the mothers and children of every person aboard.

But in the end, what has made sea travel much safer today has been science: the tools of navigation, weather forecasting, ship construction, understanding and treating the chronic Vitamin-C deficiencies of his crew and maintaining a proper written record of lessons learned.

We've learned so much about this virus that reached our shores just two years ago, but if this knowledge is not thoughtfully communicated to the public, misinformation will fill in the gaps.

It is unlikely that we've seen the last surge of COVID-19. The good news is that we are more prepared than ever to confront what comes. We must seize the opportunity to build upon what we've learned. It is imperative that we continue to invest in data tracking and communication capabilities at every level, to ensure public health decision makers have the best available information to make recommendations. Misinformation must be confronted thoughtfully and aggressively.

Outstanding questions on issues such as long COVID, infection-based immunity, and therapeutics cocktails should be aggressively pursued by scaling up clinical studies.

We may not be out of the woods yet, but we have an opportunity to meet a future COVID surge with clearer eyes and stronger tools.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about how we can bolster preparedness efforts in the next phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I now yield to Ranking Member Obernolte for his remarks.