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

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

Investigations and Oversight Subcommittee Hearing:
COVID-19 Variants and Evolving Research Needs
May 12, 2021

Good morning, and welcome to our members and our panelists. Thank you for joining us for this hearing on COVID-19 variants. Over a year into the pandemic, we're all accustomed to a new normal – social distancing, mask wearing, hand sanitizing, and, of course, the virtual proceedings we're conducting today. Almost 60 percent of Americans have received at least one vaccination dose, and our ability to detect and monitor the spread of the virus puts us in a much better position than we were just one year ago. But just as we've adapted to life in a pandemic, the virus has mutated as it continues to spread around the globe. Each new variant brings the potential for increased contagiousness, disease severity, and evasion of safety measures and vaccine-induced and natural immunity. We must ensure that the tools we use to detect, treat, and forecast the virus are keeping up with emerging variants.

Researchers, medical practitioners, and public health authorities have spent the last year standing up an unbelievably impressive network of testing, surveillance, treatment, and prevention tools. Thinking back to March 2020, it was unimaginable to many that by May 2021, more than half of Americans would be vaccinated against a virus that had just reached our shores. Disease monitoring tools require an unprecedented scale of data sharing and aggregation on an international level. And the death rate in our country has been dropping for months, thanks in part to a better awareness of how to treat this disease. We must not lose any of these gains as the virus mutates, potentially increasing its contagiousness and severity. It is imperative that we in the federal government support the efforts of researchers and public health agencies in conducting top-of-the-line research to inform health-protective policies.

Our witnesses here today will tell us about some of the amazing science that has come out of the pandemic, and how we can best support their work. Each time a new variant pops up on the CDC website, I'm sure we all have the same questions. How effective are existing tests and vaccines? How will masking and distancing guidelines be adjusted based on the contagiousness of this new strain? Will the virus cause more severe illness that requires different treatments? The U.S. scientific enterprise is equipped to answer these questions, and the federal government must continue to support and amplify this work.

In this fight, we must not lose sight of our nation's place as a world leader and the importance of international collaboration. We have all seen the recent devastating news coming out of India, making this hearing all the more timely. Stories of overloaded hospitals, insufficient vaccine

supplies, and mounting deaths. The more the virus spreads, the more mutations will occur, meaning more strains of the virus will develop. No country is out of the woods until every country has the ability to reach herd immunity. The Biden Administration has committed to this global fight by rejoining the World Health Organization and the COVAX program, pledging $2 billion to support vaccine access in low- and middle-income countries. The United States is also sending 60 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine overseas. All approved vaccines have shown to be efficacious in preventing severe disease from known variants – a triumph worth celebrating, and something we cannot take for granted. Bolstering worldwide vaccine access must go hand-in-hand with continued monitoring of vaccine efficacy in the face of new variants.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about how we can best support the research we need to end this pandemic and prepare for the next.

I now yield to Ranking Member Obernolte for his remarks.