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

Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)

Full Committee Hearing:
The Science of COVID-19 Vaccines and Encouraging Vaccine Uptake

February 19, 2021

Good morning and welcome to the first hearing of the Science, Space, and Technology Committee in the 117th Congress. We have an accomplished set of Members on our Committee who bring diverse backgrounds and perspectives to our oversight and legislative work. I look forward to a productive and stimulating 117th Congress.

It is fitting that our first hearing in the 117th Congress focus on the COVID pandemic and the role of vaccination in fighting this virus and its devastating impacts. As the first nurse elected to Congress, I am deeply committed to understanding how basic research supports healthcare solutions, and I'm also a firm believer in vaccines.

Many of you are too young to know anyone who suffered from polio, but it was a devastating disease. I helped administer the polio vaccine as a student nurse. Thanks to scientific breakthroughs by brilliant virologists in the 1950s and the tremendous vaccine administration campaign that followed, this country has been polio-free since 1979. And we didn't get there by accident. We took great care to educate the public, to ensure for vaccine access in marginalized communities, and to assist other nations in vaccinating their own populations.

Like polio, COVID-19 kills. The last 12 months have seen great suffering. But they have also seen astounding achievements in virology. Researchers at the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Disease and their research partners laid the scientific foundation over the past decade for a new type of vaccine called mRNA. When news of the viral outbreak in Wuhan reached the United States, NIAID quickly deployed partnerships with drug companies to develop safe, effective vaccines in record time. I cannot overstate what an incredible achievement it is that we have two safe, effective vaccine options less than a year after this horrible virus reached our shores. A third vaccine is being evaluated by FDA as we speak, and we may have an answer on whether it is authorized as soon as next Friday.

We have an opportunity to take the lessons learned from polio, from the measles, and so on to make sure these vaccines reach their potential. Here's one lesson: Vaccines don't save lives; vaccinations do. Designing the vaccine, manufacturing millions of doses and distributing them are the "supply" part of the equation. But in order to get needles into arms as quickly as possible, we also have to think about "demand." There are a lot of factors that make up consumer demand

for a vaccine, but perception of risk is a big one. We must build high public confidence in these vaccines. We simply will not bring this virus to an end unless we vaccinate a high percentage of the American population and in fact, the globe.

I hope our hearing today will help illuminate the methods that allowed these vaccines to be developed and approved quickly with scientific rigor, and that we will learn more about how vaccine hesitancy might threaten the pace of our national recovery. The Science, Space, and Technology Committee may not have primary jurisdiction over Health and Human Services, but we absolutely have a role in supporting public health outcomes through good science.

I welcome our esteemed panel of witnesses and thank Dr. Huang in particular for joining us, as Dallas is facing unprecedented power outages and freezing temperatures this week, and I know the demands on his time are intense right now.

Thank you, and I now yield to Ranking Member Lucas.