

Chairman Peters Opening Statement As Prepared for Delivery
Full Committee Hearing: COVID Origins
June 18, 2024

The Committee will come to order.

The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the worst public health crises our country has ever faced. We lost more than one million Americans to the virus – family members and neighbors, friends and colleagues. Millions more died around the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a once in a generation event that not only threatened our public health, but also created unprecedented challenges to our economic and homeland security, as well as our very way of life. As Americans navigated the COVID-19 pandemic – they endured changing health care guidance, uncertainty and misinformation about how best to protect themselves and their families from this deadly virus.

Today’s hearing is intended to examine the available scientific evidence related to the virus that causes COVID-19 and provide some transparency to Americans who are continuing to have to navigate their exposure to this virus.

As Chairman of this Committee, I led an investigation into the federal government’s initial pandemic response. The report, called “Historically Unprepared,” included recommendations of how we can ensure that we are better prepared to prevent and respond to future pandemics. This March, I also launched a bipartisan biosecurity and life science research investigation with Ranking Member Paul to look into a wide range of constantly evolving biological risks and threats to better enhance our preparedness for future incidents.

This morning, we are going to hear from academic experts who can discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic may have started, and how we can learn from this outbreak to better address future potential infectious disease outbreaks and protect human life.

Better understanding the possible origins of the COVID-19 pandemic is not only important for our public health, but also a matter of homeland security. We must learn from the challenges faced during this pandemic to ensure we can better protect Americans from a future potential biological incident. Our government needs the flexibility to determine the origins of naturally occurring outbreaks, as well as potential outbreaks that could arise from mistakes or malicious intent.

All that said – history has shown us it is seldom simple or straightforward to identify the singular cause of an infectious disease outbreak. It can take months or years to pinpoint an origin. In some cases, we may never find an answer.

That is also the case with COVID-19. There are theories that indicate COVID-19 began either by entering the human population through entirely natural means or possibly through a lab accident. Given the likelihood that the Chinese government may never fully disclose all of the

information they have about the initial COVID-19 outbreak, we must use the scientific information available to better prepare for potential future pandemics.

We must not only examine the scientific information we have about COVID-19, but also the tools and procedures the government has in place to understand such viral outbreaks, and how we can prevent them from becoming widespread in the future.

Today's hearing – and our panel of expert witnesses – will help us understand how the most recent pandemic began so that we can take the necessary steps to protect the American people from future biological threats.