

**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery by Chair Maggie Hassan
Emerging Threats and Spending Oversight Subcommittee Hearing:
“Examining Federal COVID-Era Spending and Preventing Future Fraud”
November 14, 2023**

Good afternoon. Our hearing today focuses on federal spending in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, efforts to conduct oversight of those funds, and opportunities to work together to prevent fraud in the future.

I want to begin by thanking Ranking Member Romney for his work on these critical issues, and for his proposal to hear from our distinguished panel of witnesses on how Congress and the federal government can strengthen efforts to prevent waste, fraud, and abuse of emergency spending.

In early 2020, few could have imagined the impact that the coronavirus would have on global health and the economy. It quickly became apparent, however, that Congress had an obligation to respond. In those early days, Congress came together to pass the bipartisan Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act – or CARES Act. This package included the first round of economic stimulus payments to individuals and families. It also established the Paycheck Protection Program designed to provide loans to small business to ensure that they could stay afloat and continue to pay their employees. And it expanded access to health care and life-saving personal protective equipment.

As the world grappled with the fallout of the global pandemic over the next two years, our country faced additional medical and economic challenges requiring additional emergency relief packages that we passed into law. The majority of those funds were provided in the form of loans, grants, and direct financial assistance.

These programs were overwhelmingly successful: investing in our economy during the pandemic helped limit negative effects on our economy and prevent a recession. These programs also shored up supplies and resources for hospitals, expanded access to crucial medical care, and deployed COVID-19 vaccines to slow the disease’s rapid spread and save lives. All of that allowed us to get back to work and school.

The federal government’s response to the pandemic was unprecedented in its size and scope. Because of that, Congress also put in place mechanisms for strong oversight.

Toward that end, Congress provided funding for the Government Accountability Office and inspectors general across the government to oversee COVID-19 spending. Congress also established the Special Inspector General for Pandemic Recovery, as well as the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee, to better coordinate oversight and promote transparency among COVID-19 relief programs. These oversight entities have uncovered hundreds of billions of dollars in scams, fraud, and improper payments involving pandemic relief programs, and are working with law enforcement to hold fraudsters accountable.

The staggering amount of fraud that they have uncovered is outrageous and unacceptable. With what we know now, it is incumbent upon agencies and Congress to improve our stewardship of taxpayer dollars. We can and must do better.

Again, I thank our witnesses and all of their colleagues for their tireless work, and for appearing today. I look forward to a robust, bipartisan discussion on the federal government's response to COVID-19 and how we can work together to hold criminals accountable for stealing taxpayer dollars and prevent fraud in the future.