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**Wyden Statement at Finance Committee Hearing on Reliability of U.S. Medical Supply Chain
During COVID-19**
As Prepared for Delivery

The Finance Committee is focusing this week on issues dealing with the lack of high-quality PPE and other equipment during the pandemic.

I know that the other side would like this to be all about China, China, China, and I agree that counterfeiting is a problem. But if you're focused entirely on that aspect of the issue, you're skipping right past the bigger story, which is the Trump administration's casual disinterest in leadership when it comes to getting PPE and making sure our health care heroes are equipped. It goes back even before the pandemic began.

In 2019, the federal government conducted a pandemic war game called "Crimson Contagion." In it, a hypothetical airborne virus originated in China and made its way to the US, infecting 110 million people and killing nearly 600,000. The exercise concluded the U.S. would need 3.5 billion N-95 masks to fight a large-scale pandemic. The Trump administration took no action to acquire them. The coronavirus arrived just a few months later.

On March 19th, 2020, with coronavirus cases beginning to go skyward, the president said the following when asked about buying and distributing PPE: "The federal government's not supposed to be out there buying vast amounts of items and then shipping ... governors are supposed to be doing it."

On March 29, he accused nurses and doctors of stealing PPE: "Something is going on, and you ought to look into it as reporters. Where are the masks going? Are they going out the back door?"

In mid-April, he called reports of PPE shortages "fake news."

On May 6, a nurse told reporters gathered in the Oval Office that the availability of PPE was "sporadic," Trump responded, quote, "Sporadic for you, but not sporadic for a lot of other people ... I have heard we have a tremendous supply to almost all places."

Just last week, he said, "My administration currently has zero unfilled requests for equipment or anything else that they need from the governors ... frankly we are stocked up and ready to go."

Wrong, wrong, wrong.

Just in the last few days, Democratic Finance Committee staff have gathered direct accounts from health care workers about PPE shortages that are devastating communities, given the recent spikes in cases. The committee heard from nurses in Dallas, Texas, where COVID cases are surging, who recently began buying their own surgical masks since their hospital was requiring staff to reuse old ones for days at a time.

The committee heard from an administrator of a 33-bed hospital in rural Alabama, serving a majority Black community, who told the committee her hospital is so low on PPE that she keeps an emergency supply stashed in her office for safekeeping.

One Oregon home health care nurse, who didn't want to provide their name for fear of retribution from their employer, told the committee they have so few disinfectant wipes that they are cutting them in quarters to last through the week.

Finance Committee Democrats want to make sure these important stories are still being heard. So I encourage doctors and nurses and first responders and nursing home staff dealing with shortages and defective equipment to submit personal stories for the hearing record at PPEshortages@finance.senate.gov. If we've learned one thing, it's that getting these stories into public view and in front of Senators can make a lot of difference.

This week, the National Nurses Union released a survey of 21,000 hospital nurses. 87% reported having to reuse PPE that's designed for a single use. According to CDC data, hundreds of nursing homes didn't have PPE in mid-July, and thousands more had less than a week's supply. States like Oregon, cities and health care providers have been forced to compete against each other and pay ransoms for equipment on the open market. That has opened the door to junk sold by scam artists and incompetent vendors.

A group of health systems was so concerned about losing access to PPE that it recently bought a minority stake in a big PPE manufacturer to keep the pipeline open. What about the smaller hospitals and independent doctors offices and nursing homes that can't afford to buy their own manufacturers?

The Trump administration has touted Jared Kushner's Project Air Bridge as a PPE game changer but Project Air Bridge brought in just 4.5 million N-95 masks over the course of three months this spring. HHS's own estimates said the U.S. needed 300 million N-95 respirators every month.

The fact is these shortages of PPE have put our doctors, nurses and caregivers in grave danger. An ongoing study by Kaiser Health News and the Guardian has identified at least 851 deaths among front-line health care workers likely due to COVID-19.

From sea to shining sea, Americans are desperately hoping there are safe and successful vaccines on the market in the coming months. They need to be distributed in a fair, methodical and medically-sound way.

Unfortunately, the country's experience over the past five months raises serious concerns about whether or not Americans can have any confidence this will be the case.

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