

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Q&A With Witnesses at Transportation and Safety Subcommittee hearing entitled “The Logistics of Transporting a COVID-19 Vaccine”

Witnesses: Dr. Rachel Levine, Secretary of Health for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and President of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officers

Mr. Richard Smith, Regional President of the Americas and Executive Vice President, FedEx Express

Mr. Wesley Wheeler, President of Global Healthcare, United Parcel Service

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[VIDEO](#)

Cantwell: Thank you, Madam Chair, thank you to you and Senator Duckworth for holding this important hearing. I've had to be in and out because Small Business is also talking about PPP so we're really trying to pay attention to what we need to help people dealing with this unbelievable COVID pandemic that's increasing in impact right now at a very critical moment. So I wanted to ask a question about what we're doing to help states and municipalities on the delivery system. I've heard from my mayors, I've heard from our health officials, you know, this is a very intense operation on the ground and they're going to need help and resources in the delivery system.

And I want to make sure that that we're thinking about how you give equitable access. I heard some of the discussion about nursing homes and definitely agree about that distribution, but want to make sure that we're getting equitable distribution to very challenged and hard to serve communities. We obviously, in the state of Washington, have 29 tribes in a big geographic area and delivering to Native Americans, and I'm sure I could give other examples. And then, I just want one more time to ask the question that Senator Capito was trying to get at, with our major layoffs in the aviation sector. Are we sure that there is nothing we need to do there in making sure that we have both pilots and equipment to be ready on the rotation side? When you obviously lay people off, they have to then requalify. And when you have equipment that's been out of service, it needs to be, I don't know what the right word is, re evaluated and put back into service in a new way.

So I just want—if you can answer those questions or address those issues which are, what do we need to do to help state and local governments on the distribution side? What do we need to make sure to do-- equitable for minority communities and are you sure we have this figured out on the workforce and equipment side?

Mr. Smith: Let me answer those in reverse order. We're very confident, and I believe Wes would say the same, that we have the assets, we have the crews, we have the infrastructure to support this mission.

Cantwell: Just if I could, is that because nobody in the rest of the larger aviation sector will be called on? Or will there be some transport over our general carriers, because they are in the carrier of business too? So is there nothing that they're going to be impacted on?

Mr. Smith: We don't believe at this point in time in the United States to deliver this we're going to need to rely on the passenger airline sector at all. Again, they could fly at airport to airport, we have plenty of capacity for that, plenty of well trained, excellent pilots and crew members who fly our missions every day. I know UPS is the same. We have plenty of capacity in the United States, but also the ability with these networks we operate, there only two companies in the United States of America that have the networks to connect all those O&D pairs that I talked about on an overnight basis, and they're both represented at this table. So, the reason we're both here and we're both doing this is because we're the only ones that can. So that's the answer to the last question.

On the second, in terms of equitable distribution, we have no say in how this is being distributed. We are simply the transportation arm and our job is to get it from point A to point B rapidly and reliably, safely and securely. That's just not a decision that we make. We're told where to take the vaccines on a daily basis and that's what we do. And then getting it out to rural areas, as I mentioned, we service every zip code in the United States of America. So does UPS, and we do that every day, on an overnight basis, by 10:30 the next day.

Mr. Wheeler: A lot of what he said, but just to add to that: The beauty of our network is that it works only as a network. So we are planning 100% with the UPS aircraft, UPS package cars and drivers and trucks. But we also have a very extensive courier network. So if we get into trouble anywhere, and we have to get a vaccine overnight on the commercial aircraft, we have relationships with all of them, and charter aircraft, and we're actually working with a lot of the manufacturers to move active ingredient and bulk product into the United States from overseas on charter aircraft.

So we have that ability. To go back to the question about helping states. We got pretty good at this with the test kits. So when we started testing and moving laboratory samples from patients to lab companies, we got very, very familiar with the state governments, the state jurisdictions, and the health authorities there. And we were helping a lot of the states to do that. And we still are. And that allows us to give you help wherever you need it.

Cantwell: Yeah, I think, Madam Chair, thank you again. This is so great that you had this hearing. But I think we need to figure out whether it's us or someone else who has to have the rest of this conversation. It reminds me a lot of what happened with the hurricanes in Puerto Rico where we had a lot of cargo on the docks, but not distributed. And I know you have equipment that can get you into communities, but we still have this big question of, who are you delivering it to and what do they have set up? And we see the complexity on TV of what it takes to actually use and do the vaccine. So the question is who's going to do that? And my sense is that states, cities and public health districts, and they need resources, and we need to make sure they have them. Otherwise, you're going to do a really great job, and then we're still going to have a roadblock. So thank you so much. This was helpful.

Mr. Smith: I'll just add, I'm very familiar with the situation in Puerto Rico because we flew a ton of that cargo into Puerto Rico. A lot of the issue there on the ground was the infrastructure being wiped out.

Cantwell: Well we-- you have to have the infrastructure to deliver the vaccine. So anyway, we'll get to this question, but again thank you again, Madam Chair. Thank you for working around the clock to help us on this pandemic.