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Joint Meeting of the House & Senate Democratic Policy Committees & Women's Health Caucus

Good morning, Senators Muth, Schwank and Cappelletti, and Representatives Bizzarro, Daley and Cephas, members of the Women's Health Caucus and members of the House and Senate Democratic Policy Committees. Thank you for convening such an important and timely discussion on the overall impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on maternal health while determining which steps should be taken to ensure the safety and wellbeing of pregnant women related to vaccine administration, quarantine, implications related to mental and behavioral health, and other factors that may present concern or challenges to women who are pregnant or nursing during the pandemic.

Today, Penn State Health is represented by Dr. Richard Legro, Chair, Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology, and Dr. Catharine Paules, Assistant Professor of Infectious Diseases. Drs. Legro and Paules are pleased to share insights on what the potential risks may be for pregnant and nursing women who choose to take the COVID-19 vaccine or those who choose to defer until more data about the vaccine in pregnancy is available.

Like colleague institutions presenting at today's meeting, Penn State Health has been on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic, slowly stemming the tide as the health system begins to vaccinate its patient population, adjusting treatment protocols as the science dictates, gaining valuable knowledge and insight along the way on how this virus presents heightened risk to special populations based on age, ethnicity, gender, preexisting health conditions and other factors. Insights gained are already allowing Penn State Health to initiate research trials that will help to develop highly specialized treatments protocols and targeted therapies for its most vulnerable populations as variants of the COVID-19 virus begin to surface.

Today's presentation will provide some general background on the emergence of the COVID-19 virus, then examine more specifically whether pregnant and nursing women are at greater risk of complications related to COVID-19

By way of background, Dr. Richard Legro is University Professor and Chair of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at Penn State College of Medicine. He is a member of the National Academy of Medicine and has been continuously-funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) for 25 years as a principal investigator having designed and led many practice-changing clinical trials in Women's Health and Infertility, and publishing over 285 peer-reviewed articles.

Dr. Paules recently came to Penn State Health from the NIH where her research focused on influenza vaccines, specifically the development of a universal influenza vaccine, and influenza therapeutics. During her time at NIH, Dr. Paules co-authored several articles with Dr. Anthony Fauci that were published in the New England Journal of Medicine. When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, Dr. Paules was deployed to focus on improving COVID-19 care at the Penn State Health Milton S. Hershey Medical Center and is the site principle investigator for the NIAID sponsored Adaptive COVID-19 Treatment Trial which led to the FDA approval of Remdesivir for treatment of patients hospitalized with COVID-19.

Dr. Paules and Dr. Legro will be speaking to the slides attached to this testimony as part of their formal presentation.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present to the Women's Health Caucus and the House and Senate Democratic Policy Committees. Drs. Legro and Paules will be happy to address any questions from the committee and caucus members following their presentation.