House Speaker Nancy Pelosi Joins UCSF Town Hall to Discuss COVID-19, The Role of Science in Turbulent Times

By Nina Bai [1]

In a special virtual town hall, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi joined UC San Francisco Chancellor Sam Hawgood [2], MBBS, to discuss the role of science and science advocacy in shaping federal policy during a global pandemic, her leadership during these turbulent times, and lessons learned during her long tenure as the first and only female Speaker of the House of Representatives.

The Democratic Congresswoman, whose district covers a large portion of San Francisco, began the event on Tuesday by thanking UCSF for being a longtime partner and leader in science and health, both in San Francisco and worldwide. She recalled how decades earlier, UCSF?s work in community-based research, prevention and care during the HIV/AIDS epidemic helped lead to the Ryan White CARE act.

Asked about the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Pelosi said denial and distortion of the reality of the pandemic had prevented a more coordinated national response. ?There are two things here at work that are not so good: One is an anti-science attitude, and the other is an anti-government attitude,? she said. ?So let?s just hope that rather than looking back, that we can look forward and hope that the public awareness of all of this will take us to a place where we have unity around science.?

Hawgood said the pandemic had raised the question of how research universities like UCSF could contribute to preparing for and responding to future pandemics. ?History tells us that COVID-19 will definitely not be the last pandemic that we experience in our lifetimes,? he said. ?And I?ve been thinking and speaking to my peers across the country about how we could perhaps create a more unified research university academic response in working with the federal government to prepare the country for what we know will come.?

Pelosi said that support from universities would be critical for legislative funding, such as when leading institutions came together in the 1990s to help double the National Institutes of Health budget.

The conversation then turned to how the pandemic has affected early career scientists and how the federal government could help. Hawgood described the risk of losing a generation of early career scientists, particularly women, due to lack of support for caregivers, as an ?existential challenge.?

Pelosi said that a massive investment in childcare, more debt forgiveness for students, and

expanding access to healthcare was needed on a national level.

She said that evidence-based research, including UCSF?s work in COVID-19 testing in the Mission District ? which showed that the Latinx community was disproportionately affected by the disease [3] ? was critical to getting Congress to recognize and redress health disparities.

?It?s immoral for us to proceed with this without recognizing the disparity in the communities of color ? you know that better than anyone,? she said to Hawgood. ?But we have to kind of convey that to some people who, shall we say, are not as close to the public experience as some of the rest of us are.?

?We just have to recognize that if we?re going to crush this virus, which we must do, it is going to take resources scientifically spent,? she said.

Finally, asked how her approach to leadership has changed over time and lessons learned for aspiring leaders, Pelosi said the best advice was to be authentic and to know your own motivations. ?But to women, especially, I say, be ready. Because I didn?t think for a minute I would be going to Congress and never thought I would run for leadership, but I was ready.?

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Pelosi closed out her portion of the town hall with a question-and-answer segment, facilitated by Francesca Vega, Vice Chancellor of Community and Government Relations. Asked how the UCSF community could help the democratic process during the pandemic, Pelosi encouraged people to vote early. ?Right now the most important thing is for people to vote and to do so early enough so that their vote is counted as cast,? she said.

The town hall continued with brief presentations by Keith Yamamoto [5], PhD, Special Advisor to the Chancellor for Science Policy and Strategy, and Natalie Alpert, Executive Director of Federal Government Relations, discussing the continued need for advocacy at the federal level.

Vega ended the event by bringing attention to various voter engagement efforts across UCSF, including the UCSF Votes [6] initiative to update addresses for mailed ballots. ?Now is the ask of all of you,? she said. ?And that?s ensuring that our voice is indeed heard and that we are aware of all the opportunities that we have within the UCSF community to get engaged.?

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