



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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Hearing Statement of Vice Chairwoman Lauren Underwood (D-IL)

Confronting the Coronavirus: The Federal Response

March 11, 2020

Today, the Committee is meeting to examine the federal government's response to the novel coronavirus outbreak. We know that the spread of coronavirus has likely not yet reached its peak, and is affecting all of our communities. Just yesterday, the first two cases were diagnosed in the counties I represent in northern Illinois.

Our job as Members of Congress is to keep Americans safe by working with the executive branch to lead a strong federal government response, including the House-led 8.3 billion dollar supplemental funding package that passed last week. A strong response must include each of these three elements:

First, we must continue support for our local and state public health departments, our health care system, and our emergency responders who are on the front lines of this outbreak. This starts with having reliable data to make decisions, like how to prepare for a surge to our health system, and how much personal protective equipment is needed for health workers. It also means developing and disseminating clear, accurate risk communication to the public. America's scientific and public health expertise is unmatched across the world, and it must be driving our decisions.

Second, we must protect people from health care costs associated with coronavirus. Testing and treatment must be widely available at no cost to patients, and price gouging of medical essentials and other supplies must be stopped. If we do not take these crucial steps, the epidemic will worsen, because families will avoid seeking care for fear they can't afford it, and our communities will be less safe.

Third, we must soften the economic impact of this crisis on American families and small businesses. This means paid sick leave for every worker, unemployment insurance, and food assistance if needed.

Given the Committee's jurisdiction, today we will also examine the Department of Homeland Security's role in the coronavirus response effort. The Department plays a key role in protecting workers on the front lines of this outbreak, processing travelers entering the U.S., and referring them for screening by healthcare workers as necessary. We will have questions today about the efficacy of this screening and how it is being performed at our air, land, and seaports. We also want to learn more about the Department's ability to protect its workers, and whether it has adequate personal protective equipment for frontline personnel such as Customs and Border Protection Officers, Border Patrol agents, and Transportation Security Officers.

Finally, we want to hear about what plans the Department has to ensure continuity of operations at certain essential facilities in case of outbreaks there, such as ports of entry, TSA checkpoints, and immigration detention facilities.

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