

As new cases are reported, senators question government's coronavirus response



BETHESDA, Maryland - Dr. Anthony Fauci (center), the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the National Institutes of Health, discusses with President Donald Trump the status of research on a vaccine against the coronavirus during a presidential visit to the Vaccine Research Center here. (Courtesy of the White House press pool)

BY **BRYAN GALLION** - MARCH 3, 2020

WASHINGTON — As new cases of the coronavirus surfaced Tuesday, some Democratic senators questioned the pace and effectiveness of the federal government's response to the outbreak of the disease.

The immediate risk to the general public remains low, principal deputy director for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Anne Schuchat assured senators at a Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee hearing. But the virus is now spreading in some communities, and more than 100 cases have been reported across 12 states.

[\[As more cases are reported, coronavirus causes new health and travel protocols\]](#)

In related developments:

- President Donald Trump toured the National Institutes of Health's Vaccine Research Center in Bethesda, Maryland, where he was briefed on research into a coronavirus vaccine.

"We're doing a fantastic job," Trump said during his tour. "The professionals are doing a great job. We're really happy with the job they're doing."

- In Annapolis, Gov. Larry Hogan announced that the state of Maryland was cleared to short-cut the federal testing protocols to conduct its own tests.

"Our highest priority is keeping Marylanders safe, and having the capability to test quickly for potential COVID-19 cases is an important part of that," Hogan said in a statement.

- As new coronavirus cases were reported in New York and North Carolina, the United States recorded its ninth death from the outbreak. Some officials have warned that there may be many more cases, but a shortage of test kits is impeding diagnoses.

Sen. Patty Murray, a Democrat from Washington and the committee's ranking member, expressed frustration with the lack of testing available in her home state, where six people have died from the virus and an outbreak has overtaken a nursing home.

"The administration has had months to prepare for this, and it is unacceptable that people in my state — and nationwide — can't even get an answer as to whether or not they are infected," Murray said.

Stephen Hahn, the commissioner of the Silver Spring-based Food and Drug Administration, told the committee that his agency's officials "have been working very hard" to manufacture more tests and increase the number of labs that can administer them. He said the FDA expects 1 million tests to be available nationwide by the end of the week.

But some senators said that goal didn't seem feasible.

"Your estimate that by the end of the week there are going to be a million tests out there does sound a little aggressive given the fact that we've only tested 3,000 people," Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Connecticut, told Hahn.

While respiratory illnesses like the flu or forms of the coronavirus are seasonal, it isn't clear whether the virus's effects and reach will diminish with warmer weather, said Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the NIH's National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

“This could happen with this (virus), but we don’t know,” he told Smith. “And the reason we don’t know is because this is a brand-new virus with which we have no experience.”

Citing conspiracies like the coronavirus being created to harm the U.S. economy, Sen. Tina Smith, D-Minnesota, asked Fauci to dispel disinformation from a health perspective.

Thinking back to when he had to explain to senators in the 1980s that “HIV was not a virus that was developed by the Central Intelligence Agency,” Fauci said false theories often arise when new viruses infect people — and it’s important to speak out when incorrect information is spread.

Sen. Tim Scott, R-South Carolina, said some people are “really painting a picture (of the virus) that is very difficult to digest,” while others are acting with a “sense of urgency.”

D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser said Tuesday that while there have been no cases of the coronavirus yet in the District, her government has begun “worst-case scenario planning” for an outbreak.

Congress is attempting to swiftly finalize a multibillion, bipartisan emergency funding package to combat the coronavirus. Governors like Hogan, a Republican, and New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, are calling for reimbursement for local efforts to combat the virus.

“States and localities are at the forefront of health crises, and novel coronavirus is no exception. Indeed, many of the confirmed cases in the United States have been identified due to the vigilance and dedication of state and local health departments,” Hogan and Cuomo said in a statement on behalf of the National Governors Association.

Hogan is chairman of the association and Cuomo is vice chairman. Governors spoke with Vice President Mike Pence, head of the White House’s coronavirus task force, in a conference call on Monday.

“It is critical that we are reimbursed for costs already incurred in assisting the federal response to the coronavirus outbreak, and any appropriation must fund the ongoing and future preparation and response efforts by our states,” Hogan and Cuomo said.

Senators from both parties at Tuesday’s hearing stressed that addressing the outbreak needs to avoid politics and focus on public health.

“There’s a lot of partisan elbows out there right now,” Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kansas, said. “We don’t need to politicize a pandemic.”