

Congress begins talks on coronavirus aid package as cases pass 3.8 million

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(HealthDay)—With U.S. coronavirus cases surging past 3.8 million on Tuesday, Congress is negotiating yet another pandemic relief package for cash-strapped Americans.

The package is likely to include a payroll tax cut, along with funding that would be tied to whether schools fully reopen, the *Washington Post* reported. Although local and [state officials](#) have said they desperately need more money to combat the ongoing public health crisis, it looks unlikely that they will receive much aid, the newspaper said.

President Donald Trump also shifted his stance on face masks dramatically on Monday: He tweeted a photo of himself wearing a [face mask](#) and said that wearing them was now "patriotic." He also announced plans to bring back the daily coronavirus task force briefings, which were stopped in April.

Meanwhile, seven states—Florida, Georgia, Nevada, Kentucky, North Dakota, Arkansas and Montana—reported record highs for coronavirus-related hospitalizations on Monday, as did Puerto Rico, the *Post* reported.

In a sign that the reality of rising case and death numbers may be sinking in, top health officials in Maryland's most populous counties asked the state to roll back reopening plans and Kentucky restored limits on public gatherings, the *Post* reported.

In Florida, more than 100 hospitals have run out of ICU beds for adults. The state has reported more than 10,000 new COVID-19 cases on at least 12 different days in July, the *Post* reported.

Meanwhile, Los Angeles is "on the brink" of shutting down again, Mayor Eric Garcetti said Sunday. Over the past week, Los Angeles County has seen its highest number of coronavirus hospitalizations since the pandemic began, the *Post* reported.

Pooled testing begins

In an effort to find a faster and cheaper way of testing Americans for COVID-19, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration gave emergency approval to pooled testing, which combines test samples in batches, the *Associated Press* reported.

The emergency use approval was given to Quest Diagnostics to perform its COVID-19 test with pooled samples. It is the first test to be authorized to be used in this way, the *AP* reported.

With pooling, laboratories would combine parts of samples from several people and test them together. A negative result would clear everyone in the batch. A positive result would require each sample to be retested.

Pooling works best with lab-run tests, not the much quicker tests used in clinics or doctor's offices, the wire service said. Theoretically, pooled testing could be used at schools or businesses.

"It's a really good tool. It can be used in any of a number of circumstances, including at the community level or even in schools," Dr. Anthony Fauci testified during a Senate hearing last month, the wire service reported.

The technique works best when fewer than 10% of people are expected to test positive, the *AP* reported. For example, pooling would not be cost-effective in Arizona, where a surge has pushed positive test results to well over 10%. But the approach could make sense in areas with a lower rate of positive results, the wire service said.

More states, retailers turning to mask mandates

As case counts and deaths have continued to climb, more states, cities and major retailers have turned to face mask mandates to try to stem the spread of COVID-19.

Increasingly seen as a last hope to slow soaring infection rates across the country, Gov. Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas announced a face covering requirement last week after taking a more hands-off approach for months, *The New York Times* reported. Colorado Gov. Jared Polis also issued a mask order last week, after questioning whether such a mandate would be enforceable.

And Alabama, Montana and the city of Tulsa moved to make face coverings required in public settings, the *Post* reported. Several large retailers also joined the trend: Walmart, Kroger and Kohl's.

Masks are now mandatory in more than half of U.S. states, the *Post* reported, and Target and CVS joined other retailers in announcing that all customers in their stores must wear masks.

The new mask mandates suggest that officials and business leaders across America are painfully aware that cases have spiked in 41 states over the past two weeks and things will only worsen if nothing is done, the *Times* reported.

Still, Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp went against the tide and nullified all

local mask mandates last Thursday, the *Post* reported. That same day, Georgia recorded its second-highest number of coronavirus cases since the start of the pandemic, with 3,871 new infections reported.

States scramble to slow spread of coronavirus

Meanwhile, states continued to try to rein in surging case counts. California and Oregon have rolled back their reopenings, two of several states across the country that are seeing spikes in cases.

On Tuesday, Florida surpassed 360,000 confirmed cases, according to a *Times* tally. The state is now third in case counts, behind only California and New York.

Florida took more than three months to reach 100,000 coronavirus cases, but then took just two weeks to jump to 200,000, *CBS News* reported.

On Monday, the Florida Education Association (FEA), a union representing 145,000 educators, filed a lawsuit against Gov. Ron DeSantis and the state's Department of Education to try to stop schools from reopening at the end of August, *CBS Miami* reported. The lawsuit argues that the coronavirus pandemic has made it unsafe to send children back to classrooms while case counts are soaring, and so it violates the state constitution.

"The governor needs to accept the reality of the situation here in Florida, where the virus is surging out of control," FEA President Fedrick Ingram said in a statement. "He needs to accept the evolving science. It now appears that kids 10 and older may pass along the coronavirus as easily as adults."

A South Korean study recently suggested that while children aged 10 and under may transmit the virus at a lower rate than adults, those aged 10 to

19 transmit the virus as readily as older adults do.

Hospitals filling up

The case spikes are resulting in another grim fact: Hospitals across the South and West are being flooded with COVID-19 patients and are having to cancel elective surgeries and discharge patients early as they try to keep beds open, the *Times* reported.

In California, doctors are shipping patients as far as 600 miles away because they can't be cared for locally, the *Post* reported. Nurses from around the country are pouring into Florida to shore up exhausted medical workers. Mayors in Texas are demanding the right to shut down their cities to avoid overwhelming hospitals.

Health officials said they are concerned that hospitals will soon hit a breaking point, the newspaper said.

"We can withstand a surge. We can withstand a disaster. But we can't withstand a disaster every single day," Jason Wilson, associate medical director of the emergency department at Tampa General Hospital, told the *Post*. "How many jumbo jet crashes can you handle before you run out of capacity? That's what we're facing."

While hospital beds are easily converted for ICU use, the more difficult challenge is having enough advanced practice nurses who are qualified to care for such patients and equipment such as ventilators, hospital experts told the *Times*.

Hospitals can "pivot enough space," Jay Wolfson, a professor of public health at the University of South Florida, explained. "The trick is going to be staffing. If you get people burned out, they get sick, then you lose critical care personnel."

By Tuesday, the U.S. coronavirus case count had passed 3.8 million as the death toll neared 141,000, according to a *Times* tally.

According to the same tally, the top five states in coronavirus cases as of Friday were: New York with over 412,000; California with over 400,000; Florida with over 360,000; Texas with over 345,000 and New Jersey with nearly 179,000.

Nations grapple with pandemic

Elsewhere in the world, the situation remains challenging.

Spain's coronavirus infection rate has tripled since restrictions were lifted at the end of June, health officials said Monday, the *Post* reported.

This spring, Spain had managed to contain its outbreak with strict lockdown measures. But over the past three weeks, the country has gone from having eight cases for every 100,000 residents to 27 cases per 100,000 residents, *Reuters* reported.

Many of the new clusters have been found in Catalonia and are linked to nightlife and large gatherings, health officials said. The Catalan regional government has asked residents to stay at home when not conducting essential business and to limit gatherings to groups of fewer than 10 people.

Meanwhile, Hong Kong tightened social distancing measures on Monday, following a sudden surge in infections there, the *Post* reported. Carrie Lam, the city's chief executive, told residents they now must wear face masks in all indoor public spaces, and she said nonessential government employees should work from home.

Things continue to worsen in India. On Tuesday, the country neared 1.2

million infections and more than 28,000 deaths, a Johns Hopkins tally showed. The surge comes weeks after a national lockdown was lifted. Only the United States and Brazil have higher caseloads.

Brazil is also a hotspot in the coronavirus pandemic, with more than 2.1 million confirmed infections by Tuesday, according to the Hopkins tally. It has the second-highest number of cases, behind only the United States.

Cases are also spiking wildly in Russia: As of Tuesday, that country reported the world's fourth-highest number of COVID-19 cases, at more than 782,000, the Hopkins tally showed.

Worldwide, the number of reported infections passed 14.7 million on Tuesday, with more than 610,000 deaths, according to the Hopkins tally.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on the [new coronavirus](#).

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