

Trump, US struggle with virus

President’s confidants in quarantine

By **ZEKE MILLER**
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A public health and economic maelstrom brought on by the coronavirus swirled around President Donald Trump and drew closer to him personally Monday as several of his congressional confidants placed themselves in quarantine, including one who traveled with him on Air Force One.

While intent on projecting calm, Trump lashed out about the plunging stock market and convened a meeting of his top economic advisers to address what to do about it. Meanwhile the number of Republican lawmakers who announced they were isolating themselves because of possible exposure to the virus grew to five.

As Trump grappled with an epidemic whose consequences he has repeatedly played down, the White House asserted it was conducting “business as usual.” But the day’s business was anything but normal. Lawmakers pressed for details on how the Capitol could be made secure, a Pentagon meeting was broken into subgroups to minimize the number of people in the same room and the Army commander in Europe placed himself in a precautionary quarantine.

Trump said Monday his administration will ask Congress to pass payroll tax relief, as he looks to calm financial markets’ fears over the impact of the coronavirus epidemic.

The president dove into handshakes with supporters Monday morning when arriving to headline a fundraiser in Longwood, Florida, that raised approximately \$4 million for his reelection campaign and the Republican Party. He ignored shouted questions about the sinking stock market as he boarded Air Force One for the flight back to Washington.

On that flight: Florida Rep. Matt Gaetz, who later went into a voluntary quarantine. He was one of several GOP lawmakers who were exposed to a person at last month’s Conservative Political Action Conference who tested positive for the virus.

In Monday morning tweets, Trump vented about the market drop and news that large public gatherings were being called off because of the virus.

“At this moment there are 546 confirmed cases of Coronavirus, with 22 deaths,” Trump tweeted, comparing it to seasonal influenza and the thousands of deaths that causes. “Think about that!”

Scientists at this stage don’t know what the death rate of the new coronavirus actually is and whether it will wind up being about the same as flu or worse.

At the same time, administration officials were insistent that they weren’t trying to dismiss public concerns. “This is a very serious health problem,” Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar told Fox News.

At the Pentagon, officials have begun “social distancing” measures.



Carolyn Kaster/AP Photo

Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar speaks to media outside the West Wing of the White House on Monday.

On Monday, Defense Secretary Mark Esper’s regular meeting with senior staff, which normally would be held face-to-face in a single room with 40 to 50 participants, was broken up into three rooms, with video-conferencing among the rooms, according to the Pentagon’s chief spokesman, Jonathan Hoffman. He said Esper and the 15 to 20 people in his room, including Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sat at least six feet apart, in line with health guidance.

Trump was delegating much of the virus response to Vice President Mike Pence, who convened a video teleconference to give an update on the federal government’s virus response Monday afternoon with the nation’s governors.

On Capitol Hill, where many lawmakers are older and have frequent constant contact with the public, leaders were fielding questions from members and staff about how the complex will be secured. Leaders have so far shown little willingness to close the Capitol, but meetings were scheduled throughout the day to discuss preparations.

On Monday, Rep. Doug Collins, R-Ga., and Gaetz put themselves in voluntary quarantine because of their contacts with someone at the Conservative Political Action Conference.

Both said they did not have any symptoms but would wait out the remainder of the 14 days since the contact at home. Gaetz last week wore a gas mask to the House vote on the emergency funding bill for the virus response and said he wanted to highlight how Congress could become “petri dish” for the virus.

Collins met Trump on Tuesday night at the White House and shook hands with him Friday when the president visited the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Atlanta headquarters.

Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, and Rep. Paul Gosar, R-Ariz., also placed themselves in quarantine after coming in contact with the same person at the conservative conference.

“The president of the United States, as we all know, is quite a hand washer,” press secretary Stephanie Grisham told Fox News earlier Monday. “He uses hand sanitizer all the time. So he’s not concerned about this at all.”

The White House didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment on the new cases.

As well, Rep. Julia Brownley, D-Calif., said she met last week with a person who has since been diagnosed with the virus. She closed her office and said she and her staff are “self-monitoring and maintaining social distancing practices.”

Vast numbers of visitors come to the Hill, especially at this time of year when advocacy groups arrange “fly-in” trips to lobby and speak to lawmakers, and school groups descend for tours.

In one manifestation of lawmaking in the age of the coronavirus, Rep. Richard Neal, D-Mass., approached a Republican colleague on the House floor Monday for a routine congratulatory handshake after the chamber approved a bill expanding a visa program. “Shake or bump?” Neal asked Rep. Kelly Armstrong, R-N.D.

The two men bumped elbows.

Trump met Monday afternoon with Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, Larry Kud-

low and other aides when he returned to the White House about a range of economic actions he could take, officials said. He also invited Wall Street executives to the White House on Wednesday to discuss the economic fallout of the epidemic.

Kudlow, director of the president’s National Economic Council, told reporters Friday that the administration is not looking at a “massive” federal relief plan. Rather, any federal aid package would be “timely and targeted and micro.”

Lawmakers on Capitol Hill had barely started to contemplate the economic implications of the spread of the virus and what might be needed to stimulate the economy as people cancel vacations and business trips and stay away from stores. Senate Finance Committee Chairman Chuck Grassley is “exploring the possibility of targeted tax relief measures that could provide a timely and effective response to the coronavirus,” spokesman Michael Zona said Monday.

“Everything’s on the table,” Grassley told reporters.

More virus deaths at Washington state nursing home

By **MARTHA BELLISLE**
Associated Press

SEATTLE — King County public health officials on Monday reported three new deaths from coronavirus and 33 new cases while Grant County in central Washington state announced the first death from the disease outside the Seattle area.

The total number of deaths from COVID-19 in Washington is now at least 22. Health officials report more than 160 cases. Public Health — Seattle & King County said in a statement that two women, one in her 90s and another in her 70s, died Sunday. Another woman in her 80s died March 4 but her death was reported Monday. All three were residents of a Seattle-area nursing home that has been racked by COVID-19. Authorities say 19 of the deaths in Washington are associated with the Life Care Center of Kirkland, Washington.

Also Monday major Seattle businesses, including Amazon, Microsoft, Starbucks and Alaska Airlines, said they are chipping in to help those hit hardest economically by the new coronavirus. The companies joined with the city of Seattle, King County and the Seattle Foundation to announce the creation of a new philanthropic fund.

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee said on Monday he won’t be holding any more public bill signings, citing concerns about the ongoing coronavirus outbreak.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia.

The vast majority of people recover from the new virus. According to the World Health Organization, people with mild illness recover in about two weeks, while those with more severe illness may take three to six weeks to recover. In mainland China, where the virus first exploded, more than 80,000 people have been diagnosed and more than 58,000 have so far recovered.

One of the new COVID-19 cases in the Seattle area was a first responder in Kirkland.

Thirty-one Kirkland firefighters and three police officers are in quarantine, while six have been released after completing their quarantine period without developing symptoms, officials said. Most are in isolation or quarantine at home.

First responders who developed symptoms have been tested and eight came back negative, but one recently tested positive for the disease, officials said in a release.

Health officials are trying to determine whether the first responder caught the virus due to contact with a patient or with the general public. Those who test negative must remain in quarantine for the full 14-day period, as recommended by Seattle and King County public health officials.

“We remain committed to supporting our firefighters in quarantine and isolation, as well as those on duty,” said Chief Joe Sanford.

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