

Trump: Governors play 'political game' with virus tests

By ALAN SUDERMAN,
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Associated Press



Vice President Mike Pence speaks during a coronavirus task force briefing at the White House on Sunday in Washington.

AP Photo/Patrick Semansky

WASHINGTON — A chorus of governors from both parties pushed back hard Monday after President Donald Trump accused Democrats of playing “a very dangerous political game” by insisting there is a shortage of tests for the coronavirus. The governors countered that the White House must do more to help states do the testing that’s needed before they can ease up on stay-at-home orders.

Kansas’s Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly said the current federal effort “really is not good enough if we’re going to be able to start to open our economy. We cannot do that safely without the tests in place.”

The plea for stepped-up coordination came on the latest day when the Trump administration provided discordant messaging: Trump blasted state leaders on Twitter for being too dependent on federal government, while Vice President Mike

Pence assured governors the government was working around-the-clock to help them ramp up testing.

Pence sought to soften the administration’s message amid growing clamor from governors of both parties for a national testing strategy to help secure in-demand supplies like testing swabs and

chemical reagents. Trump said Sunday that he could use the Defense Production Act to compel one company to manufacture swabs.

“When it comes to testing, we’re here to help,” Pence told governors during a videoconference from the headquarters of the Federal Emergency Manage-

ment Agency. The Associated Press obtained audio of the call.

Pence said the administration sent an email to officials on Monday detailing current testing capacity by state. But Maryland’s Republican Gov. Larry Hogan said much of the unused lab machinery listed for his

state by the administration was in federal labs that the state does not have access to. Pence agreed to open up federal labs to help states.

In Kansas, officials have said they would like to do 15,500 additional tests to sample the population to determine the prevalence of the coronavirus. Kansas has about half the national testing rate.

Kelly said part of the problem has been caused by how FEMA has gone about distributing testing material and other supplies.

In Ohio, Republican Gov. Mike DeWine said his state is working with another federal agency, the Food and Drug Administration, to find a source of reagent, the chemical used to analyze test results, so it can ramp up testing. “A lot of good things are going on, but we’re not there yet,” DeWine said. “And we’ve got a ways to go.”

Democratic Montana Gov. Steve Bullock said his state received 5,000 nasal swabs on Monday from FEMA — evidence the federal government is listening. But he added: “It doesn’t get

us far enough.”

In New York, Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo, whom Trump has vacillated between praising and criticizing, said the states should take the lead on testing but it’s up to the federal government to help sort out supply chain issues facing testing manufacturers.

“What the states will run into is when you talk to those labs ... they buy machines and equipment from national manufacturers,” Cuomo said. “And those labs can only run as many tests as the national manufacturers provide them chemicals, reagents and lab kits.”

Pennsylvania’s Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf said, “We need the reagents, we need the test kits and I think that’s the sort of general cry from other states.”

From Michigan, Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer said, “Robust testing is essential to have confidence about our strategies for safely reducing risk and reengaging sectors of our economy. We’re all needing swabs. We’re all needing the reagents.”

Feds to track, share information on nursing home outbreaks

By CANDICE CHOI
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Calling nursing homes ground zero of the coronavirus crisis, federal officials said Monday they plan to start tracking and publicly sharing information on infections and deaths in such facilities to help spot trends and early signs the virus is spreading in communities.

The move comes as critics, industry officials and local leaders have called for more aggressive actions by the federal government to track infections in homes and contain outbreaks by helping them get greater

access to testing and masks, especially given the vulnerability of elderly residents.

“It’s our intention to make that information public,” Seema Verma, head of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, said during a call with reporters, adding that details were still being worked out on when or how the information would be distributed.

Because the federal government has not been releasing a count of its own, The Associated Press has been keeping its own tally from media reports and state health departments, finding at least 8,426 deaths linked to coronavirus outbreaks in

nursing homes and long-term care facilities nationwide.

But the true toll of the mostly frail and elderly people who live in such facilities is likely much higher, experts say, because many homes have not reported their deaths and state counts may not include those who died without ever being tested.

For the federal tracking of infections, Verma said homes could start reporting by the end of this week and that questionnaires from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will collect information on deaths as well as confirmed and suspected cases, includ-

ing among workers. She also said nursing homes will also be required to tell patients and family members within 12 hours of a confirmed infection.

Verma noted that that federal surveillance of outbreaks at nursing homes will be important for reopening the country since infections in the homes could be early predictors of spread in communities.

“It’s fair to say nursing homes have been ground zero” for the virus, Verma said, noting that the Life Care Center nursing home in Washington state became the first COVID-19 hot spot in the U.S.. That outbreak

eventually claimed 43 lives.

Some of the biggest outbreaks since have included 55 deaths at a nursing home in New York City’s Brooklyn borough, 49 at a home outside Richmond, Virginia, 48 at a veteran’s home in Holyoke, Massachusetts, and at least 40 deaths each at five homes in outer boroughs of New York City.

Experts say the outbreaks have been fueled by the industry’s chronic challenges with controlling infections and staffing shortages. Several major outbreaks have been blamed on asymptomatic spreaders who made it past screening measures, such as daily

temperature checks for staffers that nursing homes were ordered to put in place in mid-March.

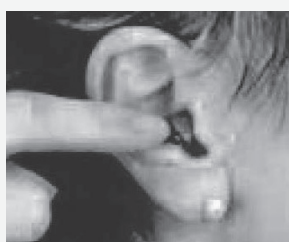
Mark Parkinson of the American Health Care Association, which represents nursing homes and assisted living facilities, said he hopes federal officials will use the data they collect to identify where to prioritize badly needed resources like testing and masks for residents and workers.

“The country was so focused on making sure that hospitals were fully equipped and ready for a surge of admissions, we were really left behind,” he said.

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