

# It's Official, Coronavirus Emergency in America: House Passes COVID-19 "Families First" Response Act

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*On March 13, House members passed HR 6201: Families First Coronavirus Response Act by a 363 - 40 majority vote hours after Trump declared a national COVID-19 emergency.*

The measure moves to the Senate. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said its members "will need to carefully review the version just passed by the House," adding:

"I believe the vast majority of senators in both parties will agree we should act swiftly to secure relief for American workers, families, and small businesses."

Trump's declaration makes about \$50 billion in federal funds available to states and US territories for use in dealing with and containing COVID-19.

He suspended entry of foreign nationals to the US who've been in Europe since end of February.

US citizens and residents returning from Europe will be screened for possible COVID-19 infection and quarantined if necessary.

Interest on debt-entrapping student loans are temporarily suspended. The Department of Energy will take advantage of low oil prices to increase the US (energy) strategic reserve.

Trump announced support for HR 6201. According to Speaker Pelosi, it authorizes \$8.3 billion (in) emergency funding," adding:

"This legislation is about testing, testing, testing. To stop the spread of the virus, we have secured free coronavirus testing for everyone who needs a test, including the uninsured."

There's more including "paid emergency leave with two weeks of paid sick leave and up to three months of paid family and medical leave."

It authorizes "enhanced unemployment insurance" for laid off workers, numbers likely to increase as economic conditions weaken, maybe exponentially if things worsen dramatically because of social distancing by millions of people to avoid possible infection from the virus.

To enhance food security, the measure includes funding for increased food stamp benefits, school lunches, as well as "seniors' nutrition and food banks."

There's "increased federal funds for Medicaid" and \$1 billion for a National Disaster Medical System.

The measure calls for reimbursing families and individuals without health insurance, along with providing \$82 million for "defense beneficiaries, \$64 million for the Indian Health Service and \$60 million for veterans."

Work will begin in the House on follow-up emergency legislation. What House members passed Friday is a drop in the bucket compared to what's needed.

The devil is also in fine print of House and Senate measures — most important in their implementation when signed into law by Trump.

What's authorized so far by the House, likely to be largely or entirely agreed to by the Senate, already accepted by Trump, is way short of what's needed — hundreds of billions of dollars to address an unprecedented situation that's likely to persist for some time while economic conditions weaken, making a bad situation worse.

Monetary policy is ineffective in dealing with a national health emergency.

Fiscal policy can help greatly by putting money in the pockets of ordinary people for essentials — provided large enough amounts are authorized for as long as needed.

Government provided healthcare for everyone is vital at times like now, not tinkering around the edges alone that HR 6201 authorized.

At times of national duress like now, government is a backstop of last resort to provide aid for what households can't provide for themselves.

Perhaps \$1 trillion or several trillions of federal funding are needed to address what's going on — the amount depending on how long emergency conditions last.

Things are likely to get much worse ahead before improving. It's essential for Washington to work all-out cooperatively with states and local communities to address things as long as crisis conditions persist.

Newly announced restrictions in my Chicago residential building with hundreds of residents may be a sign of more of the same to come elsewhere.

We've been instructed to socially distance ourselves from other residents, in common areas stay six feet or more from others, not visit the management office, communicate by phone and/or email instead — all non-emergency work orders temporarily suspended.

We were told to cease visiting the building areas where residents normally gather, wash hands thoroughly before entering common areas, and use knuckles or elbows to push elevator buttons.

If ill for any reason, self-quarantine as a precaution and notify management. Building maintenance was ordered to disinfect, disinfect, disinfect common areas multiple times daily.

At the federal, state, local, and personal levels, it's important to go all-out to deal with what

may become an unprecedented situation in our lifetimes.

No guidelines exist to predict what may unfold ahead other than comparing the current situation to the century-ago Spanish flu when societal structures and state of the art medical care were world's apart from now.

Over one-fifth of the world's population was infected from 1918 - 1920, millions perishing worldwide.

Can history repeat? What happened before can happen again but shouldn't if all-out proper steps are taken by authorities and individuals through self-protective measures.

At times of great duress, unity against a common foe is vital until it passes and things return to normal.

Until then, hunkering down and following sound personal hygiene practices are essential to stay safe.

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