



Findings, Week 2 with Dr. David Relman and Mr. Andy Slavitt

Introduction

The COVID-19 Regional Recovery Task Force (RRTF) was established to address the needs of states in the Northeast as they prepare to relax their orders to shelter-in-place and reopen the region's economy. Working with leading experts in key fields, this task force will support new federal legislation tailored to get Americans back to work safely and to address critical questions facing the United States in the coming weeks and months, particularly in the Northeast.

In this week's meeting of the RRTF, the Members of Congress heard from Dr. David Relman, Professor of Medicine and of Microbiology & Immunology at Stanford University, and a member of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine Standing Committee on Emerging Infectious Diseases. Members also heard from Mr. Andy Slavitt, the former Acting Administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), and the Founder and Board Chair of United States of Care, as well as a senior advisor to the Bipartisan Policy Center.

Key Findings from Week 2

Congress can support strong leadership by the federal government to scale testing capacity by establishing standards for manufacturers; identifying opportunities for generic testing supplies; and addressing latent testing capacity

Experts agree that testing will have to increase in order to reach both symptomatic and asymptomatic carriers of the virus on a recurring basis. The U.S. has conducted around 7 million tests total, at a rate of 150,000 to 200,000 tests per day. The Harvard School of Public Health estimates the U.S. will need to expand to 5 million tests per day in the immediate term, and by the summer, the country will need to expand to 20 million tests per day. Expanding to 5 million -- and then 20 million -- tests per day will require taking a bespoke industry and turning it into a scale industry. Tests were designed to be used on a specific machine with specific reagents and a specific swab. Diagnostic companies are incentivized to require their own supplies to be used; however, there is good evidence that testing supplies are more interchangeable than advertised.

Companies that produce testing equipment and supplies are unlikely to change on their own, and so there is an important role for the federal government to play in strategizing how testing

can be scaled in coordination with manufacturers, regulatory agencies, and laboratories. Specifically, strong leadership at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is needed to:

- Establish a set of standards for diagnostic equipment manufacturers; for example, specific targets within the viral genome, sensitivity/specificity, levels of accuracy;
- Conduct an assessment of available diagnostic equipment to understand what supplies are interchangeable (i.e. reagents, swabs) in order to determine what “generic” supplies can be manufactured at scale;
- Make publicly available the “recipes” for generic supplies and encourage domestic manufacturers to produce those supplies at scale;
- Incentivize scaling at commercial laboratories;
- Identify where there is latent testing capacity at state and academic laboratories and work with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to extend Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments (CLIA) certification to those laboratories

Congress can provide resources to support the mental health of healthcare workers to ensure the health and safety of this essential workforce

It is crucial that Congress take care of the nation’s healthcare workers who are on the frontlines battling COVID-19 every day. Even as the number of cases decline, these healthcare workers will continue to take care of people with lasting effects of the virus, address those who were unable to get treatment for non-COVID issues, and mitigate any resurgence of the virus in the future.

This not only means ensuring that healthcare workers have personal protective equipment and places outside of their homes to isolate, but also that they have access to the mental health care that they need. Recent [studies](#) have shown that healthcare workers on the front lines and those exposed to COVID-19 have a high risk of experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. Especially as the healthcare system prepares for a potential resurgence of cases, Congress can devote the resources necessary to ensure that those on the frontlines stay both physically and psychologically healthy.

Congress can provide support for nursing homes and long-term care facilities to improve infection control

There are several identified hotspots where the fatality rates due to COVID-19 are much higher than in the general population -- these include densely populated urban environments, multigenerational households, public housing, detention centers, and nursing homes/long-term care facilities. Nursing homes and long-term care facilities, in particular, need immediate federal support. About a third of U.S. virus deaths are linked to nursing homes and long-term care facilities. Entire populations of residents are dying of COVID-19 due to a persistent lack of infection control measures -- personal protective equipment (PPE), isolation spaces, training, and testing for residents and staff.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued [guidance](#) to nursing homes and long-term care facilities on testing for residents and staff. To complement this guidance, Congress could stand up a grant program that gives not-for-profit nursing homes and long-term care facilities--or those that accept a certain portion of Medicaid patients--the funding needed to mitigate current outbreaks and improve infection control. These grants may be used to:

- Acquire rapid diagnostic tests and supplies
- Acquire screening equipment for visitors, residents and staff (e.g. thermometers, pulse oximeters, blood pressure cuffs)
- Acquire PPE and cleaning products
- Construct triage and cohorting spaces with the appropriate resident care equipment
- Construct or expand morgue spaces
- Maintain safe staffing levels
- Provide training for infection control

Conclusion

These findings build on the discussion with Dr. Scott Gottlieb during the inaugural meeting of the RRTF. Dr. Gottlieb emphasized the importance of identifying and isolating individuals infected with the COVID-19 virus through mobile testing capabilities, contact tracing, and voluntary self-isolation. Dr. Relman and Mr. Slavitt expanded on the need to scale testing through strong leadership and cooperation. In addition, Congress needs to protect the mental health of healthcare workers, who put themselves at risk each day and will continue to serve on the frontlines as businesses and organizations start to reopen. And finally, Congress should address hotspots where transmission and fatalities remain high, such nursing homes and long-term care facilities, by providing grants to mitigate current outbreaks and assist with infection control. A comprehensive strategy that includes wider testing, supporting healthcare workers, and stopping transmission in particular hotspots will go a long way towards preparing the environment for reopening and ensuring resilience in the face of any future outbreaks.