

# House Passes \$8.3 Billion Emergency Coronavirus Response Bill

The spending package dwarfs what the Trump administration requested to confront the outbreak.



By Emily Cochrane

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WASHINGTON — Racing to confront a growing public health threat, the House resoundingly approved \$8.3 billion in emergency aid on Wednesday to combat the novel coronavirus, hours after congressional leaders reached a deal on the funding.

The bipartisan package, which includes nearly \$7.8 billion for agencies dealing with the virus and came together after days of intensive negotiations, is substantially larger than what the White House proposed in late February. It also authorizes roughly \$500 million to allow Medicare providers to administer telehealth services so that more elderly patients, who are at greater risk from the virus, can receive care at home.

“Congress is acting with the seriousness and sense of urgency the coronavirus threat demands,” said Representative Nita M. Lowey, Democrat of New York and chairwoman of the House Appropriations Committee, who introduced the legislation Wednesday afternoon. “Strong funding in this legislation is a critical first step to enable a strategic, coordinated and whole-of-government response to the coronavirus.”

The measure was approved 415 to 2, far more than the two-thirds needed to pass under expedited rules reserved for consensus measures. Two Republicans, Representatives Andy Biggs of Arizona and Ken Buck of Colorado, voted against the package.

“I don’t think this is the time to hesitate and wrangle over how to pay for something as acute to public health as this is,” said Representative Greg Walden, Republican of Oregon.

The quick action was a recognition of the urgent need described by government health officials to respond to the virus, and mounting dissatisfaction among lawmakers in both parties with the funding request submitted by the Trump administration. The Senate is also expected to approve the funding, sending the measure to the White House, where President Trump said at a news conference last week that he would “spend whatever is appropriate” to counter the outbreak.

“This should not be about politics,” Senator Richard C. Shelby, Republican of Alabama and chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said in a statement. “This is about doing our job to protect the American people from a potential pandemic. We worked together to craft an aggressive and comprehensive response that provides the resources the experts say they need to combat this crisis.”

Top appropriators struck a deal to provide \$7.8 billion in new money, rebuffing the administration’s request to use more than \$1 billion in existing funds shifted from within health agencies. Under the bill, the funds could be used only to combat the spread of the coronavirus and other infectious diseases.

The measure would also reimburse \$136 million that the administration had previously transferred from other programs in the Department of Health and Human Services. Ahead of Congress approving the emergency funds, the agency said it would transfer \$25 million of those funds to states and cities that have already spent substantial resources on the response to the virus. The money would go toward lab equipment, staffing, shipping and infection control, among other things.

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The measure would provide \$6.5 billion for the department, with \$2.2 billion designated specifically for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, \$3.1 billion for the Public Health and Social Services Emergency Fund and \$836 million for the National Institutes of Health.

The funds allocated to the C.D.C. would include \$1 billion for state and local preparedness and response, with half of those funds going to states, cities and tribes within 30 days, according to a summary provided by the Senate Appropriations Committee. Each state would receive no less than \$4 million.

The Food and Drug Administration would receive \$61 million, and the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development would receive \$1.25 billion. The package also allows the Small Business Administration to administer loans, in anticipation of an uptick in need among small businesses affected by the outbreak.

Once supplemental funding is provided, the Department of Health and Human Services said it would begin awarding money to more states and cities. Lawmakers have for weeks called on the department to reimburse local health departments for the costs — believed to be in the tens of millions so far — of monitoring potentially infected people.

More than \$3 billion in the package would be designated for research and development of vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics to treat or prevent the spread of the coronavirus. House Democrats also secured an additional \$300 million to allow for the procurement of vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics, and ensure their affordability.

Lawmakers and their aides negotiated through the weekend over the provisions of the bill, but talks stalled earlier this week over Democratic efforts to further limit the expense of vaccines or treatments. They had proposed allocating significant funding to bulk purchases of any developed treatments or vaccines that could then be distributed to the public without cost, according to a senior Democratic aide familiar with the negotiations but unauthorized to disclose them publicly.

But Republicans had raised concerns about “experimenting with ideological proposals that could jeopardize research, development and innovation,” as Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the majority leader, put it on the Senate floor.

“Look, everyone agrees that the potential diagnostics, therapeutics or vaccines that might come out of this new funding cannot only be available to the ultrawealthy,” Mr. McConnell said on the Senate floor. “We already have longstanding, tried-and-true procedures so the government can buy and distribute new medicines in scenarios like this, to ensure accessibility.”

An effort to attach unrelated provisions that would renew several expiring F.B.I. surveillance powers was also shelved to ensure smooth passage.

The emergency aid package was finalized as Democrats upbraided administration officials during congressional hearings on Wednesday about what they called a lackluster effort to respond to the outbreak and insufficient investment in federal health programs.

“We are potentially facing a public health crisis like we haven’t seen in years, and from everything I’ve seen this president doesn’t get that,” said Representative John Yarmuth, Democrat of Kentucky and chairman of the Budget Committee. “He proposed a woefully inadequate coronavirus supplemental that cannibalized other programs, playing a dangerous game of public health whack-a-mole.”

Later Wednesday, House lawmakers attended closed-door briefings with Vice President Mike Pence, who is leading the administration’s response to the outbreak, and other top health officials, including Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease. (Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California bumped elbows with Mr. Pence in greeting during the Democrats’ briefing, as opposed to shaking hands, according to one person who witnessed the exchange.)

“I feel as good as you can possibly feel dealing with an unknown virus,” said Representative Tom Cole, Republican of Oklahoma, after leaving the briefing.

Mr. Pence said publicly on Wednesday that the Department of Health and Human Services had designated tests for the coronavirus to be an “essential health benefit,” subject to coverage without any cost-sharing by private insurance, Medicare and Medicaid.

But that designation, a part of the Affordable Care Act, does not apply to all those programs — it only governs some categories of private health insurance. And under the law, essential health benefits can be subject to co-payments and deductibles, in contrast with Mr. Pence’s description. By the end of the day, the department had issued no new regulations or written guidance on the matter.

Ms. Pelosi also arranged a briefing on Wednesday for the top four congressional leaders to hear from Capitol Hill officials about precautions being taken in the Capitol complex, which is visited by throngs of tourists each day and serves as the workplace for lawmakers and thousands of aides.

Asked if the complex would remain open, Ms. Pelosi told reporters: “At this time, yes. Without question.”

Reporting was contributed by Noah Weiland, Catie Edmondson, Abby Goodnough, Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Margot Sanger-Katz.

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Updated March 9, 2020

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