

CONGRESS

Senate approves \$8.3 billion emergency coronavirus package

The measure now heads to President Donald Trump, who is expected to quickly sign the bill.



Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell speaks about the coronavirus outbreak on Tuesday. | Andrew Harnik/AP Photo

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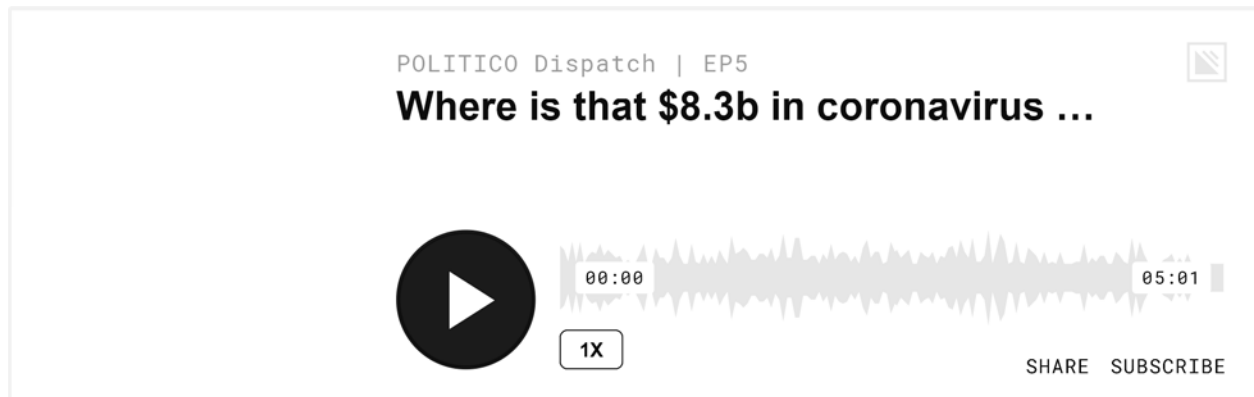
The Senate rapidly cleared an \$8.3 billion emergency funding bill Thursday to aid the fight against the coronavirus, as U.S. deaths from the illness reached double digits and more than 160 people tested positive across more than a dozen states.

President Donald Trump is expected to soon sign the measure, which moved

The debate over a national response continues to be tinged, however, with partisanship and criticism of the Trump administration's handling of the crisis as federal departments prepare to put the newfound billions to use in combating the outbreak.

Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), the top Democrat on the Senate's spending panel, said Thursday that lawmakers from both parties have been "very clear" that Congress is "going to watch where the money goes."

HHS will face the grandest task: Spending a total of \$6.5 billion, including meting out \$1 billion to states, cities and tribes over the next 30 days for local responses to the virus, with each state getting at least \$4 million in assistance. Congress has also ordered the department to use \$3.1 billion of its quota on medical supplies, vaccine-making and ensuring U.S. health systems are up to the task of battling the deadly bug.



While the money will first flow to federal agencies, the cash — and much of the onus to tackle the epidemic — will soon be with state and local officials, said Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.), chairman of one of the Senate's spending subcommittees.

"We have our oversight responsibilities, but we have to rely on our governors and state and local public health systems," Alexander told reporters Thursday. "So we have to have confidence in them, because they're closer to the problem."

Under the bill, almost \$1.3 billion will also go to the State Department for efforts like evacuating diplomats and boosting global health programs.

The Small Business Administration will get an infusion, too, with an extra \$20 million for increasing the number of loans that go out to businesses affected by the spread of the coronavirus.

Senate Appropriations Chairman Richard Shelby (R-Ala.) said congressional spending leaders circled back privately with federal agencies this week, asking, "What do you really need? Not politically."

While the chairman predicted the \$8.3 billion is likely to be enough to handle the response to the coronavirus, he said lawmakers from both parties will be ready to pass a follow-on bill if the funding starts to seem insufficient.

"We think this is a good bit of money. But if they need money, we'll provide it," Shelby said. "Money should be no problem — no object when it comes to the health of the American people, especially to prevent something this contagious."

Conversely, if the money turns out to be far more than is needed to fight the virus, the bill's authors say it can't be squandered since the legislation includes a narrow definition of the coronavirus and requires officials to report back to Congress on how they are using the cash.

"So it can't just be used to pad coffers, should this not turn out to be what we thought it was going to be," a top Republican Senate aide told reporters.

Under the bill, the Trump administration would have to replace the \$136 million it has transferred from accounts intended for performing health research, helping people with substance abuse and subsidizing energy bills for households that can't afford to cover utility costs. The administration would also be barred from using the new money for anything besides combating the coronavirus or other infectious diseases.