

American Nephrology Nurses Association

Daily Capitol Hill Update – Tuesday, March 17, 2020

(The following information comes from Bloomberg Government Website)

Schedules: White House and Congress

WHITE HOUSE

- 9:30am: President Trump holds call with restaurant executives over the coronavirus
- 10:30am: Coronavirus task force holds press briefing
- 2pm: Trump meets with tourism industry executives to discuss responses to the virus
- 3:30pm: Trump has phone call with supply retailers and wholesalers over the coronavirus
- 4:30pm: Trump meets Sec. of State Michael Pompeo

CONGRESS

- House on recess
- Senate meets at 10am for morning business; will recess from 12:30pm until 2:15pm for weekly caucus luncheons
 - Chamber will weigh consideration of H.R. 6201, an economic relief plan for the coronavirus that includes free testing for everyone who needs it
- Congressional leaders have already assigned key committee leaders to develop a third package of legislation in response to the outbreak
 - Treasury Sec. Steven Mnuchin is likely to seek a phase three stimulus package of \$850b or more today

Congressional, Health Policy, and Political News

- **Medicare Payment Cuts:** U.S. hospitals, girding for an onslaught of new COVID-19 patients, are urging Congress to suspend Medicare payment reductions for the remainder of the pandemic. Suspending a budget-mandated 2% reduction in reimbursement rates would provide “a much-needed jolt of confidence not just for hospitals, but for physicians, post-acute providers, Medicare Advantage plans and so many others who rely on Medicare as a trusted partner,” a trio of hospital groups told Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) and Pelosi in a letter.
- **Congress Weighs Fiscal Stimulus:** Democrats and Republicans are considering options to quickly pump cash into the hands of consumers and the White House is pursuing options to target aid to airline and cruise companies as well as other industries hardest hit by a consumer base that’s now staying shuttered at home. Congressional leaders have already assigned key committee leaders to develop a third package of legislation in response to the

outbreak. This one would more directly stimulate the economy than the \$8 billion allocated for equipment and supplies and the House-passed bill awaiting Senate action.

- Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) said yesterday he will soon unveil a \$750 billion relief package he says would “mainline money into the economy” and “directly into the hands of families that need it most,” while also address hospital capacity problems, expand unemployment insurance, provide immediate payment forbearance on federal loans, and pause evictions.
- Sen. Mitt Romney (R-Utah) yesterday proposed immediately giving all Americans a check of \$1,000. Romney also is pushing a requirement for health insurers to temporarily cover telehealth, according to his office. Romney called to allow “unexpected costs” as a result of the pandemic to be a factor for Pell Grant amounts and for loan deferments for recent graduates affected by the coronavirus.
- **Trump Shifts Tone on Virus Health Response:** Trump markedly shifted his tone on the coronavirus outbreak, warning yesterday that it could last months and drive the U.S. into an economic recession after he had repeatedly minimized the impact. In a remarkable pivot, Trump advised Americans against gathering in groups of more than 10 people and said they should stop eating out at restaurants and going to bars. Children should be educated at home to the extent possible, he said. The U.S. may still be fighting the outbreak until August or later, he said.
 - “Someday soon, hopefully, it will end and we’ll be back to where it was,” Trump said, but he acknowledged: “It’s bad. It’s bad. We’re going to hopefully be a best case and not a worst case.”
 - There have been more than 4,000 cases of the virus in the U.S. and 71 deaths from the disease, according to Johns Hopkins University. Yesterday, the benchmark S&P 500 stock market index fell nearly 12%, the most since 1987, and Trump acknowledged that the U.S. economy may enter a recession.
 - “We have an invisible enemy, we have a problem that a month ago nobody ever thought about,” Trump said. “I’ve seen all of the different problems similar to this that we’ve had -- this is a bad one, this is a very bad one, this is bad in the sense that it’s so contagious, it’s just so contagious, sort of record-setting type contagion.”
- **U.S. Called Private Sector in Late in Testing Ramp Up:** Every outbreak of a new disease is a race between the pathogen and the people trying to stop it: At first, the virus is somewhere out in front. Catch up with it before new patients become contagious, and it can be surrounded and cut off. Let it run too far ahead, and the race is lost. In the U.S., the race to contain the new coronavirus with testing is all but over.
 - With reported cases rising rapidly, hospitals are anticipating a wave of sick patients and struggling to secure supplies of surgical masks, eye protection devices, and ventilators. States are now trying to limit the damage from the pathogen, which experts believe could infect at least half of the country’s 329 million people, curtail economic and personal activity for weeks or months, and plunge the economy into recession.
 - “We’re so far behind this thing at this point. And the reason we’re so far behind is because we’ve had so little testing,” said Ashish Jha, director of the Harvard Global Health Institute. “This is such a rapidly moving infection that losing a few days is

bad, and losing a couple of weeks is terrible,” Jha said. “Losing 2 months is close to disastrous, and that’s what we did.”

- **DOD Stance in Virus Treatment:** The Pentagon is expressing caution about its ability to provide swift medical assistance in the effort to treat the coronavirus outbreak after former Vice President Joe Biden called for a mobilization using military hospitals and tents. The Defense Department’s 36 hospitals in the U.S. are better-suited to treating battlefield traumas than contagious diseases and are designed to meet the “immediate” needs of service members and families, Air Force Brigadier Gen Paul Friedrichs, the surgeon who advises the Joint Staff, told reporters. He said the same is true for “deployable” hospitals. “We do not have any 500-bed hospitals designed for infectious disease outbreaks,” he said.
 - The remarks came after Biden, the leading Democratic presidential candidate, said in his debate with Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) on Sunday that the U.S. military should be called upon to do more to help respond to the spread of the virus. “The answer is I would call out the military,” Biden said. “They have the capacity to provide this surge.”
- **Europe, U.K. Limit Travel:** The European Union proposed a temporary halt to non-essential travel, while Canada and the U.K. placed restrictions on who can enter the country, further steps to firm up the world’s borders to prevent the spread of Covid-19.
- **Teachers Union Demand Shutdown:** The National Education Association, the largest teachers union and largest single labor union in the U.S., said yesterday that schools across the country should close for at least two weeks in response to the outbreak of coronavirus. The CDC on Sunday issued a recommendation against gatherings of more than 50 people, but it exempted schools. President Lily Eskelsen García said the same standards should apply to school campuses to protect students and teachers.
 - The American Federation of Teachers, the second-largest teachers union, called a national school shutdown “inevitable” but the group didn’t call for a shutdown outright. Both groups said states and school districts should prepare to provide support, including meal services, to vulnerable students should campuses close.
- **Economists Rush to Quantify Recession:** Trump now sees the risk of a U.S. recession due to the coronavirus. His frankness, which contradicted his previous optimism and the view of Secretary Mnuchin one day earlier that the nation could skirt this fate, rattled investors, with stocks closing 12% lower for their steepest losses since 1987.
 - Forecasts for the U.S. vary wildly, with some guessing economic activity could decline by as much as 5% or even 10% in the second quarter. An even harder question is how long the slowdown will last: a short, sharp shock or something lingering or nasty. “The middle two quarters of this year are going to be very challenging even if we get the spread of the coronavirus under control quickly,” said Carl Tannenbaum, chief economist at Northern Trust Corp. in Chicago and a former Fed staffer.

- **Direct Aid for U.S. Airlines:** Senate Republican leaders are discussing options to help the U.S. airline industry weather the slowdown in business caused by the pandemic, including loan guarantees and direct financial aid, Senate Transportation Chairman Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) said before he joined McConnell and others for a closed-door meeting. “Loan guarantees properly structured can be helpful but we may need a cash infusion,” he said.
- **States And Cities Scramble:** Faster unemployment benefits were instituted yesterday in at least three states, and San Francisco announced it will help private employers pay sick leave as governors and mayors moved to blunt the impact of paychecks lost because of the new coronavirus. “We want everyone to know that staying home to take care of themselves and their families is the most important thing they can do,” San Francisco Mayor London Breed said.
 - Meanwhile, the California Legislature yesterday unanimously passed an aid package that would provide an initial \$500 million and allow for as much as \$1 billion to be appropriated if needed. Lawmakers also unanimously sent Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) a \$100 million appropriation to help schools pay for cleanup and buy protective equipment.
- **Student Loan Reprieves:** Struggling student loan borrowers will get a reprieve on interest when they seek forbearance under a debt relief plan announced by the White House, though they won’t see changes to monthly payments. Trump’s announcement on March 13 that he was waiving interest on all federal student loans “until further notice” to provide relief from the impact of the coronavirus doesn’t translate into immediate savings for borrowers. Instead, it potentially could deliver savings later.
- **Digital Research Database:** The White House Office of Science and Technology Policy on Monday unveiled a new database with thousands of scientific articles about the coronavirus in hopes to help public health experts fight the outbreak. U.S. Chief Technology Officer Michael Krastios told reporters the new database is a “call to action” for tech companies to leverage artificial intelligence to mine the research to answer important questions about the virus.
- **Utilities Vow to Keep Water Flowing:** More than 100 public utilities in at least 34 states have agreed to halt the practice of cutting off water to homes that fail to pay their water bills during the coronavirus crisis. The CDC has been urging people to wash their hands regularly with soap, saying it’s one of the best ways of keeping the Covid-19 virus at bay. But that’s only possible if a household has tap water.
- **Biden Set to Lock in Lead Even Though Virus Closes Ohio Polls:** Narrow victories by Joe Biden in today’s primaries would effectively end the Democratic presidential nomination fight, making it nearly impossible for Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) to capture the delegates needed.
 - Three states, Arizona, Florida and Illinois will hold votes today despite concerns about voters and poll workers becoming infected with the coronavirus. Ohio was

- scheduled to have a primary as well, but back-and-forth court action late yesterday ended with the voting being delayed.
- Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine (R) had asked a court to delay his state's primary to June 2, and two people in their 60s sued, saying they shouldn't have to choose between their health and voting. But Franklin County Common Pleas Judge Richard Frye said it would be a "terrible precedent" for a court to step in at the last minute to rewrite the election code. Within hours, DeWine said the state health director, Amy Acton, would order the polls closed as a health emergency. He said the secretary of state, Frank LaRose, would work to extend voting options "so that every voter who wants to vote will be granted that opportunity."
 - Biden was heavily favored in all four states, as well as the remaining major contests in the spring, a continuation of his sweep of the contests since South Carolina that has put him on a glide path to the nomination.
- **Kentucky Delays May 19 Primary:** Kentucky will delay its scheduled May 19 Democratic and Republican primaries until June 23 due to the virus outbreak. Kentucky's secretary of state said in a Twitter post he hopes the postponement will enable a "normal" primary election in June. County clerks of both parties agreed on the move.
 - **Biden Wins Washington State:** Joe Biden has won the Democratic primary in Washington state, with late-breaking votes depriving Sanders of a much-needed win. NBC, ABC and the New York Times called the state for Biden yesterday, six days after a mail-only March 10 primary election was deemed too close to call. Sanders was ahead in the race on Election Night. But updated election results yesterday showed that late-breaking votes postmarked by Election Day but received afterward predominately went Biden's way, giving him a 23,000-vote margin over Sanders.
 - **Renewal of Surveillance Authority:** The Senate yesterday approved a stopgap bill restoring expired federal surveillance powers under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act for 77 days. McConnell said the Senate approved the temporary extension by voice vote, providing time to debate objections to the law without letting the authority for U.S. intelligence agencies to monitor communication of suspected terrorists lapse for an extended period. Provisions of the act expired Sunday. The House will still have to vote on the short-term extension.
 - **Senators Ask Saudi Arabia to Review Oil Supply Plans:** Thirteen Republican Senators asked Saudi Arabia to calm economic anxiety in the oil and gas sector as the coronavirus continues to impact markets. The letter came after guidance was issued by the country's energy minister to lower crude prices and boost output capacity.
 - **Justice Department Targets Criminals Exploiting Fear:** Federal prosecutors across the U.S. will make it a priority to investigate and punish criminals who seek to take advantage of public fear over the coronavirus crisis, such as peddling fake cures or carrying out cyber attacks, Attorney General William Barr announced yesterday. The mandate was conveyed

in a directive that Barr issued to the nation's 93 U.S. attorney's offices following reports of online scams, including individuals and businesses selling bogus treatments as well as hackers inserting malicious software onto mobile apps designed to track infections.

- **Equal Employment Agency Picks:** Trump sent to the Senate his nominations for three seats on the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and for two on the National Labor Relations Board, moving to fill long-term vacancies and shore up future openings ahead of the November election. Trump nominated Labor Department official Keith Sonderling and Gibson Dunn attorney Andrea Lucas for Republican EEOC seats and civil rights attorney Jocelyn Samuels for a Democratic post on the commission, the White House announced. Sonderling and Samuels would fill seats currently vacant, while Lucas would eventually replace commissioner Victoria Lipnic (R).
 - Trump also nominated former NLRB member Lauren McFerran (D) and current member Marvin Kaplan (R) for new five-year terms on the panel, which monitors union elections and enforces federal labor relations law. McFerran left the NLRB when her first term expired in December, and Kaplan's term ends in August. The five nominees are likely to be considered as a single block.
- **DOD Names Lietzau Head of Counterintelligence, Security Agency:** The Defense Department announced William Lietzau as the new director of the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency. Lietzau replaces Acting Director Charles Phalen Jr., who has held the role since July, DOD said in a statement.
- **Space National Guard:** Senior Pentagon leaders favor the creation of a Space National Guard for already existing state military space units and personnel as they transition to the new active-duty Space Force service. Gen. John Raymond, the Space Force chief, considered five scenarios for managing 1,244 Air National Guard space personnel in six states and the territory of Guam, including making no changes. Moving them into an independent new Space National Guard is the top recommendation, the draft said.
- **U.S. Drops 'Putin's Chef' Firm in Case:** U.S. prosecutors said they've decided to drop charges against a Russian company accused of bankrolling a troll farm to influence the 2016 presidential election, saying that continuing to go after the company wasn't in the interest of justice. The government said yesterday in a filing in Washington that it was dropping charges against Concord Management and Consulting LLC, a company controlled by a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin.