

American Nephrology Nurses Association

Daily Capitol Hill Update – Thursday, April 23, 2020

(The following information comes from Bloomberg Government Website)

Schedules: White House and Congress

WHITE HOUSE

- President Trump has no public events scheduled
- 5pm: White House coronavirus task force holds press briefing

CONGRESS

- House meets at 10am with first votes expected from 1:30pm
 - Votes may be slower in chamber Thursday as House members are set to vote in groups to limit number of people on House floor

Congressional, Health Policy, and Political News

- **Coronavirus Investigations:** A new House investigative panel would be formed to probe the coronavirus outbreak and the federal government's response under a House resolution also set for a vote today.
 - The resolution would establish a Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis within the House Oversight and Reform Committee. The panel would include as many as 12 members appointed by Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), with as many as five recommended by minority leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.).
 - The subcommittee would investigate the use of taxpayer funds for relief and stimulus spending, allegations of price gouging and profiteering, federal programs to expand virus testing and develop vaccines, and disparate effects of the virus on communities in the U.S., among other issues. The panel's chairman, selected by the speaker, would be authorized to issue subpoenas.
 - The resolution would allocate \$2 million for the panel, which would disband 30 days after submitting a final report to the full House.
- **U.S. to Award Health Providers \$20 Billion:** The federal government plans to distribute another \$20 billion to health providers whose businesses have been struck by the pandemic, adding to \$30 billion that was already distributed. The money is part of the \$100 billion set aside for hospitals, physician practices and other health-care providers in the \$2.2 trillion stimulus package meant to help people, businesses, and organizations amid the crisis. While some hospitals are inundated with Covid-19 patients, many are struggling financially after canceling elective procedures and office visits that are big money-makers for the systems.
 - The initial \$30 billion was distributed based upon providers' Medicare fee-for-service revenue, a simple calculation that let the government send the money quickly. But some hospitals said it resulted in hospitals that need the funding most getting shortchanged in the initial round.

- **Rural Hospitals Get HHS Relief:** Small rural hospitals and telehealth education centers will get nearly \$162 million to prevent, diagnose, and treat Covid-19, the HHS said yesterday. The funding will be divided among 1,779 rural hospitals to help them respond to the pandemic and among 14 telehealth resource centers, which help rural hospitals in offering telehealth services, the Health and Human Services Department said. HHS Secretary Alex Azar said the funds would help to expand telehealth, procure personal protective gear, and boost testing capacity.
- **Outbreak-Related HHS Rule Changes Now Online:** The Trump administration is making it easier for state and local health-care authorities dealing with Covid-19 to sort out what they can and can't do. It's putting all guidance and regulatory actions – and there are a lot – in one place. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services yesterday released an online coronavirus “Workforce Virtual Toolkit” for health-care decision-makers that includes information on funding opportunities, liability protections, and workforce training.
 - The White House has taken a number of actions to bolster the health workforce to treat Covid-19 patients, including allowing medical practitioners to practice at the top of their license and across state lines and expanding telehealth services covered by Medicare. In one example, the administration has specific guidelines for different types of health-care providers on how they could expand the scope of their practices to respond to the coronavirus.
- **Trump Disagrees With Georgia Re-opening:** Trump said he disagreed with the Georgia governor's decision to begin relaxing its social-distancing measures, in a departure from the president's repeated calls for states to re-open. “I disagree with what he's doing,” Trump said at the White House in reference to Gov. Brian Kemp's (R) announcement that tattoo parlors, movie theaters and nail salons in Georgia will begin re-opening this week. “I think it's too soon,” Trump said.
- **Labor Markets in Key Election States Are Among Worst in US:** Labor markets in key presidential battleground states are among the hardest hit by the virus-induced economic crisis, according to an index of state activity released yesterday from the Philadelphia Federal Reserve. Workers in Pennsylvania, Arizona, Florida and Michigan were among the most affected in March. The data further highlights the pressure on Trump to return Americans to work, without worsening the public health crisis that has killed more than 45,000 people.
- **Trump Signs Order Suspending U.S. Immigration:** Trump signed an executive order yesterday temporarily curbing immigration in what he described as an effort to limit competition for jobs as the U.S. takes steps toward re-opening the economy. “This will ensure unemployed Americans of all backgrounds will be first in line for jobs as our economy re-opens,” Trump said at a White House briefing. The president's order will only apply to foreign nationals on foreign soil seeking residency in the U.S., and will not affect those who currently have valid visas or travel documents. It also exempts individuals seeking to permanently enter the country as a medical professional or researcher, as well as

members of the armed forces, those seeking asylum or refugee status, and children being adopted by American parents.

- **Business Temper Liability Expectations:** Businesses that reopen during the coronavirus pandemic likely won't be completely off the hook if workers and customers fall ill, even as the Trump administration looks at ways to ease employers' liability concerns. Trump and White House economic adviser Larry Kudlow said this week the administration is exploring protections for business from certain legal risks related to reopening. Kudlow described the idea as a "guardrail" of sorts, but stopped short of any concrete proposals.
 - Business lobbyists say it's unlikely the administration could successfully create a broad shield protecting companies from potential personal injury, workplace safety, and other litigation. Some are looking instead for a targeted response that would ease some of the risk at the federal level.
- **Confidence in Fed Chair High:** Americans' confidence in the Federal Reserve's leadership reached a 15-year high as the central bank moved aggressively to counter the crippling economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic. A combined 58% of respondents said they had a "great deal" or "fair amount" of confidence that Fed Chairman Jerome Powell would do or recommend the right thing for the economy, according to an April 1-14 survey by Gallup.
 - Powell fared better than Trump, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and the congressional leadership of both parties. Among options provided by the survey, respondents ranked only their own governors more highly than the Fed chairman.
- **Mnuchin Pressed on Returned Stimulus Checks:** A pair of House Democrats asked Mnuchin for details about how the department is handling the nearly \$1 billion in stimulus payments returned to government coffers. Reps. Mike Thompson (Calif.) and John Lewis (Ga.) requested the department to explain how it is going to ensure the payments land in taxpayers' pockets at a time when the outbreak continues to keep businesses shuttered.
- **States that Asked First Got More Disaster Relief:** States that acted swiftly to request coronavirus relief last month are getting an outside share of small-business disaster loans compared with those that waited just a day or two longer to make the call. The data shows loan-approval data for the first \$5.6 billion in Economic Injury Disaster Loans through the Small Business Administration, which is separate from the Paycheck Protection Program.
- **Luxury Hotel Exec Biggest Winner of Small-Business Relief:** A Dallas hotel executive whose empire includes luxury resorts has emerged as the biggest winner from the coronavirus bailout for small businesses. A combined total of \$59 million from the small business lending package went to three lodging companies chaired by Monty Bennett, according to regulatory filings. The money went to Braemar Hotels & Resorts, which owns luxury properties including the Ritz-Carlton in St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands. The small business loan program has come under fire after big restaurant chains like Potbelly got loans, while many mom-and-pop firms were left stranded.

- **Unused Oil Said to Undercut Aid Need:** House Natural Resources Committee Democrats yesterday pushed back against Trump's call for new aid to the oil and gas industry, citing a report that found nearly 10,000 drilling permits the industry sought on federal lands have gone unused. Chairman Raul Grijalva (D-Ariz.) and Rep. Alan Lowenthal (D-Calif.) argued the Government Accountability Office report calls into question years of Trump's efforts to speed permit approvals for the oil and gas sector on federal lands in pursuit of what the administration terms U.S. "energy dominance."
- **Airport Tower Hours to Be Trimmed:** About 100 U.S. airport towers would see reductions in the amount of time they are staffed by air-traffic controllers under a plan announced yesterday by federal aviation regulators. The Federal Aviation Administration said it's trying to keep controllers safe from Covid-19 and lessen the chance that towers will need to be closed as a result of infections or staffing shortages.
- **Pot Shops Said to Need Federal Aid:** Small cannabis businesses are blocked from applying for coronavirus-related emergency relief. A group of Democrats in the Senate want to change that in a future aid bill. The cannabis industry employed more than 240,000 Americans earlier this year, the senators said, but marijuana dispensaries have been forced to tighten their belts, and let workers go to make their ends meet during the outbreak. State-legal cannabis businesses should be given a slice of Small Business Administration support to avert more job losses as millions of Americans are thrown out of work, 10 Democrats wrote in a letter to Senate leaders.
- **NJ Governor Slams McConnell Bankruptcy Comment:** New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy (D) blasted Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) for saying he favors allowing states struggling with high pension costs amid the burdens of the pandemic response to declare bankruptcy rather than giving them a federal bailout. "Encouraging, engendering, explicitly almost hoping" for bankruptcy "is completely and utterly irresponsible," he said, in a rare display of anger for the generally even-tempered governor. "You have my word we won't go bankrupt."
- **CDC Head Denies Warning of Second Wave:** U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Robert Redfield denied saying to the Washington Post that a second wave of the novel coronavirus in the country this winter could be worse than what the country already experienced. "I didn't say that this was going to be worse," Redfield said at a White House's press briefing. "I said it was going to be more difficult and potentially complicated" because of the seasonal flu and coronavirus circulating at the same time.
 - Redfield was quoted by the newspaper on Tuesday claiming a resurgence in the virus could coincide with flu season and put a strain on the country's health-care system. He said yesterday he was accurately quoted in the article, but that the headline lacked context.
 - Redfield's comments to the Post threatened to create a political problem for Trump, whose November re-election could be imperiled by concern over a resurgence of the

coronavirus. Earlier yesterday, Trump said Redfield was “totally misquoted” by CNN, which summarized the Post reporting.

- Trump expressed confidence the coronavirus won’t hit the U.S. with the same intensity if it returns in the fall, suggesting the deadly disease “might not come back at all.” Trump’s assertion yesterday at a White House briefing is at odds with medical experts who say the virus could pose a threat to the U.S. for months and years to come. A possible resurgence in the fall could imperil the president’s re-election campaign, which hinges on how well he manages the crisis.

- **Health Aide Says He Was Fired Over Drug Rebuke:** A top public health official who was helping lead efforts to find a coronavirus vaccine said he was removed from his post because he insisted on limiting the use of a drug Trump has pushed as a Covid-19 treatment, despite scant evidence it works. Rick Bright was abruptly pushed out of his position as the director of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority on Tuesday and given a smaller position at the National Institutes of Health.
 - The drugs Trump touted, hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine, “clearly lack scientific merit,” Bright said in a statement released by his lawyers yesterday. “I rightly resisted efforts to provide an unproven drug on demand to the American public,” he said. “Sidelineing me in the middle of this pandemic and placing politics and cronyism ahead of science puts lives at risk.”
 - Trump, asked about Bright at the White House briefing yesterday, said “I never heard of him. When did this happen?” He then added: “I don’t know who he is.”

- **California to Expand Testing:** California Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) said he had a “very good” conversation yesterday with Trump, who agreed to send the state a minimum of 100,000 swabs needed to boost testing for the novel virus. Another 250,000 are expected next week, he said. Newsom is aiming to sharply increase testing for the coronavirus as a step toward re-opening the world’s fifth-largest economy. California currently has capacity to test 16,000 per day and expects to reach 25,000 by the end of the month, with an ultimate goal of 60,000 to 80,000, he said at a press briefing.

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- **Texas Lets Abortions Resume:** Texas said clinics can once again offer all legal abortion services so long as they stick to their promise not to accept publicly provided medical masks, gloves and gowns for the duration of the coronavirus crisis. The state notified an Austin federal judge yesterday that clinics have the green light to resume all legal abortions at facilities that certified they will abide by the Republican governor's new public health order that took effect earlier in the day. Like the governor's earlier directive, the new one bans all nonessential medical procedures -- including abortion -- but exempts elective procedures at facilities that promise not to deplete public stockpiles of personal protective equipment and to reserve 25% of their hospital beds for treating Covid-19 patients.
- **Trump's Crisis Handling Has Spiked Number of Undecideds:** Trump's handling of the coronavirus pandemic and the economic collapse has shaken voters' confidence in him, with the percentage of undecided voters more than doubling in the last two weeks.
 - Former Vice President Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic nominee, is also seeing voters take a second look at their support. With his campaign limited to a few livestream events a week, he hasn't been able to capitalize on Trump's newfound weakness.
 - Three weeks ago, only 5% of voters overall were undecided in the 2020 race. That number has jumped to 12% and in one Fox News poll, 16% as voters appear to find both candidates wanting during a national emergency.
- **Biden Leads Trump in Michigan, Pennsylvania:** Biden has significant leads over Trump in Michigan and Pennsylvania, two Fox News polls showed. The polls both found Biden leading the incumbent president by 8 points in the swing states, which could have a decisive role in the November election. Fox found Biden ahead in Michigan 49% to 41% and leading 50% to 42% in Pennsylvania. In Pennsylvania, 51% of respondents said they disapproved of Trump's performance, compared with 47% who approved. The result was identical in Michigan. Trump narrowly won both states in 2016.
- **Trump Chooses Tata for Top Defense Post:** Anthony Tata, a retired Army brigadier general and Fox News commentator, will be named to a top job at the Pentagon, two people familiar with the matter said last night. Tata, a West Point graduate who has published several novels, would become undersecretary of Defense for policy, if confirmed by the Senate. He would replace John Rood, who was ousted in February.
 - Rood was the official who certified to Congress last May that Ukraine was eligible to receive \$250 million in security assistance. That aid was later temporarily blocked by the White House, a decision at the center of Trump's impeachment.
- **Water Bills Said to Need More Funding:** Two bipartisan draft water infrastructure bills unveiled this week by the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee are a good start but will need even more funding in the wake of the pandemic, water agencies and other groups said yesterday. The America's Water Infrastructure Act of 2020 centers mostly on U.S. Army Corps of Engineers projects and policy, and would authorize roughly \$17 billion in infrastructure projects.

- **Iran Says U.S. Action in Gulf Will Be Met With Swift Response:** The commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps told the U.S. his country will firmly defend its security and any action in the Persian Gulf would be met with a "swift and decisive" response. "To the Americans, we announce that in defending our national security, maritime borders, interests at sea and the security of our ships and forces at sea, we are fully determined and serious," General Hossein Salami said in comments published by Sepah News, its official news website.
 - The comments come after Trump said he'd ordered the U.S. Navy to destroy any Iranian gun boats that harass American ships at sea.
- **U.S. Probes Possible Insider Trading off OPEC Tips:** The U.S. is investigating whether traders with inside information on Russia's negotiations with other oil producing nations made hundreds of millions of dollars from illegal wagers on crude price swings, according to two people with direct knowledge of the matter. The Commodity Futures Trading Commission probe is focused on whether aspects of the strategy the Russian government pursued last month with other members of the OPEC+ coalition leaked out to market participants ahead of time.
- **U.S. Halts Plan to Help North Korea on Climate:** The U.S. is blocking a United Nations initiative its backers argue would help North Korea cope with increasing risks posed by climate change even as the UN eases the flow of supplies meant to help mitigate a pandemic. A request made by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization to run a two-year program inside North Korea to assist Kim Jong Un's regime in responding to climate disasters and hazards was rejected by the U.S. on the grounds it fell short of humanitarian rule exemptions.