

LOOKBACK: KEY COVID-19 UPDATES MARCH 9-13

Over the past week, there have been several updates about the coronavirus from all levels of government. In addition to the discussion lawmakers are having with public health experts at hearings and the primetime briefing by President Trump, departments throughout the administration have released fact sheets and guidance documents on a near daily basis. Here is a brief recap of the highlights:

Monday, March 9

- **Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS):** Released [guidance](#) on the screening, treatment and transfer procedures healthcare workers must follow when interacting with patients to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in a hospice setting. CMS also issued [guidance](#) specific to nursing homes to help control and prevent the spread of the virus (WHG [summary](#)).
- **CMS:** Issued a [press release](#) highlighting the telehealth benefits in the agency's Medicare program for use by patients and providers
- **CMS:** Published [guidance](#) to hospitals with emergency departments (EDs) on patient screening, treatment and transfer requirements to prevent the spread of infectious disease and illness, including COVID-19
- **The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR):** [Announced](#) it will provide advanced development support to a diagnostic test for COVID-19 that can be used to process up to 1,000 tests in 24 hours, which is being developed by Hologic, Inc. (WHG [summary](#)).
- **Congressional Research Service (CRS) FAQs on Development and Regulation of COVID-19 Diagnostic Testing:** CRS released a [summary](#) of frequently asked questions regarding the development and regulation of domestic diagnostic testing for COVID-19.

Tuesday, March 10

- **House Appropriations Subcommittee Hearing on the FY 2021 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Budget:** Lawmakers continued to press CDC Director Dr. Robert Redfield for answers about problems with coronavirus testing, including questions about what caused the initial delay in deploying test kits, as well as what plans the agency has to address continued difficulties accessing both testing and results. Members committed to not cut the CDC's budget as the President's FY 2021 Budget Proposal called for. Instead, they repeatedly asked the Director what amount of funding the agency needs to both respond to the coronavirus and ensure that sufficient funds are available to improve CDC's ability to predict and respond to future public health threats.
- **House Appropriations Subcommittee Hearing on the FY 2021 U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Budget:** Secretary Sonny Perdue discussed the flexibilities available to low-

income school districts that may need to adjust their food service programs in the event of coronavirus-related school closures. (WHG [summary](#)).

- **Washington Healthplanfinder:** [Announced](#) a special enrollment period (SEP) in response to the coronavirus outbreak
- **CMS:** Issued guidance on the CDC's updated Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) recommendations for health care workers. (WHG [summary](#)).
- **CMS:** Issued memoranda to [dialysis facilities](#) and [home health providers](#) on screening and containment strategies for patients, visitors, and staff. (WHG [summary](#)).
- **CMS:** Issued [guidance](#) to help Medicare Advantage and Part D plans respond to the coronavirus (WHG [summary](#)).

Wednesday, March 11

- **The World Health Organization (WHO):** Officially [declared](#) the coronavirus a global pandemic.
- **The Internal Revenue Service (IRS):** [Announced](#) that high deductible health plans (HDHPs) are able to cover coronavirus costs without cost-sharing.
- **CDC:** [Released](#) mitigation strategies to help stop the spread of the coronavirus (WHG [summary](#)).
- **The Food and Drug Administration (FDA):** [Issued](#) a letter to health care providers on recommendations for mask and gown conservation (WHG [summary](#)).
- **President Trump:** [Announced](#) a travel ban to Europe during a primetime news briefing to the nation.
- **Families First Coronavirus Response Act (H.R. 6201):** House Democrats [introduced](#) a package of bills intended to bolster the federal government's response to the coronavirus outbreak and address the safety and financial impacts in communities (WHG [summary](#)). President Trump has not endorsed this bill, though House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin continue to negotiate a deal.
- **The Department of Health and Human Development (HHS):** [Announced](#) that the CDC is moving forward with awarding more than \$560 million of the \$8.3 billion in supplemental spending passed by Congress. The funding will be provided to states, localities, territories, and tribes, to assist with the coronavirus response.
- **Massachusetts Health Connector:** [Announced](#) that it will be offering a SEP through April 25 due to the coronavirus.

Thursday, March 12

- **House Oversight Committee Hearing on Coronavirus Preparedness and Response:** At a House Oversight Committee hearing that began on Wednesday, the proceedings were abruptly stopped when witnesses were called away to attend a meeting at the White House. The hearing

reconvened Thursday morning and discussion around testing equipment and personal protective equipment (PPE) supplies resumed. Members were also concerned about ensuring that that costs associated with testing and treatment of coronavirus were covered for all individuals. Additionally, members addressed strategies for containment and mitigation including social distancing and the European travel ban.

- **CMS:** Provided additional information on coronavirus response strategies for Medicaid and CHIP agencies (WHG [summary](#)).
- **Senate Democrats Introduce the Free COVID-19 Testing Act:** Sen. Tina Smith (D-MN) [led](#) a group of Democratic Senate colleagues, including Democratic Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (NY), Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Ranking Member Patty Murray (D-WA), and Senate Finance Committee Ranking Member Ron Wyden (D-OR) in introducing the Free COVID-19 Testing Act ([summary](#)). Highlights follow: Waives cost-sharing for COVID-19 diagnostic testing and testing-related services for individuals enrolled in private health plans, Medicare, Medicare Advantage, Medicaid, Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), TRICARE, and the VA, as well as for federal civilians, American Indians, and Alaska Natives; prohibits private health plans from imposing limits, such as prior authorization; and, regarding uninsured individuals, covers the cost of lab fees and creates new incentives for states to cover COVID-19 diagnostic testing and related health services through Medicaid.

Friday, March 13

- **The Food and Drug Administration (FDA):** [Issued](#) new flexibilities to the New York State Department of Health to address the COVID-19 outbreak and issued the third Emergency Use Authorization diagnostic. (WHG [summary](#)).
- **CMS:** Released a [fact sheet](#) to assist Medicare providers with information related to the price of CDC tests and non-CDC tests for COVID-19. (WHG [summary](#)).
- **Democrats Urge HHS to Establish a Special Enrollment Period:** More than 100 House Democrats [sent](#) a letter, urging Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Alex Azar to establish a Special Enrollment Period (SEP) for qualified individuals to obtain coverage through the federal exchange or state-based exchanges during the COVID-19 pandemic. They point out that HHS declared a SEP during previous public health emergencies (e.g., Hurricanes Irma, Maria, Nate, and Harvey), therefore serving as precedent for HHS. Of note, [Washington](#) and [Massachusetts](#) have announced that they will offer a SEP due to the pandemic through April 8 and 25, respectively.
- **President Donald Trump** officially classified the COVID-19 outbreak as a national emergency.