

INDUSTRY SPECIFIC CONFERENCE CALL ON COVID-19

On March 2, 2020, the White House convened a conference call addressing specific concerns advanced by the business community in response to the emergence of COVID-19 (otherwise known as the Coronavirus). The White House convened key officials from agencies across the administration working to contain the spread and mitigate the effects of the virus. Officials stated they intend to hold these calls on a regular basis or as needed to continue to keep industry informed on the administration's latest thinking on the U.S. response. Overall, they stated risk remains low, but to exercise good judgement in traveling and to reach out to administration officials with any questions.

Introductory Remarks

Officials requested that businesses and organizations in the U.S. update their own workforce and human resource (HR) policies to ensure an appropriate, community-driven response to the spread of the virus. They discussed the importance of remaining engaged with state and local officials, as these actors will be key to coordinating public health efforts across the nation. As was said often during the event, the U.S.'s public health response will be "locally executed, state managed, and federally supported." Officials stated it is important therefore for governors and local leaders to engage private sector and non-profit partners to ensure businesses and organizations are "using this time to raise preparedness...while risk is still low." They noted that the U.S. has some of the "greatest scientists and experts" in the world and is interested in private sector feedback on the U.S. response to the virus, which will continue to inform federal agency action.

From an economic perspective, officials also stated they are closely monitoring the economy and are updating their understanding of the viruses' impact as the situation develops. As it currently stands, they stated, the U.S. has the strongest economic position of any Group of Seven (G7) country, but that they are aware this could change at any moment. To this end as well, they are keeping an open dialogue with the private sector to see how all markets are impacted.

After these introductory remarks, officials from multiple agencies then spoke on each agency's specific guidance and perspective on the virus response. Details follow.

Centers for Disease Control (CDC)

- CDC officials noted that the global situation is "very dynamic and evolving," as the situation "[improves] in much of China" and worsens in other parts of the world. The U.S. federal government is reportedly working to learn from the successes in other foreign nations – such as Singapore – that have successfully responded to the virus' spread. They maintained that the risk to

the average American “is still low” but that selective pockets in the U.S. are experiencing community spread (e.g., Washington state and California).

- While it is critical for businesses to have predictability, officials stated that emerging viruses are hard to predict and that businesses will “need to do the best [they] can with managing uncertainty.”
- The U.S. response to date has been to contain the virus, including measures such as the travel restrictions and advisories. Officials noted, however, that this is becoming increasingly difficult as more countries become infected. Now, officials are looking to efforts to limit spread more actively at the local level as certain communities become afflicted.
- The CDC’s overarching principle is that life should go on with as little disruption as possible and that individuals have a responsibility to do what they can to limit spread of the virus and to protect those who are most vulnerable (i.e., elderly individuals and those with chronic condition comorbidities).
- Businesses should work to limit work-related exposures to the virus. The CDC advises that employees stay home when they or their family members are sick. They encourage businesses to review their HR policies to ensure they support and facilitate employees’ abilities to take leave when necessary to prevent spread of the disease.
- CDC officials noted that respiratory viruses are spread within close contact of six feet between individuals. Along these lines, CDC further recommended that businesses assess whether they can reduce overcrowding in workplace offices, such as by setting up flex time or telework policies. CDC especially emphasized ensuring essential business functions can be maintained in the event of reduced personnel.
- The CDC stated they do not anticipate having to close cities down, but that some disruption may occur if the disease spreads rapidly in certain communities. In the event of school closures, for example, the CDC cautioned businesses to ensure they could accommodate the indirect effects of this on their workforce.
- On the question on travel, CDC first noted that advisories are updated daily as they receive new information. This, they stated, is important to consider as businesses plan for upcoming travel and large meetings/conferences/gatherings, especially those held internationally since attendees could face challenges returning to the U.S. They cited the intensive exit screenings being implemented in Italy and South Korea, for example.
- Last, the CDC emphasized the importance of cleaning individuals’ environments (e.g., workplaces, schools, and homes) more often than they normally might to help mitigate spread.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)

- HHS officials echoed much of what CDC stated in emphasizing the importance of tele-work, and the potential need for school closures and other more intensive containment strategies as the agency prepares for the “mitigation phase” of the virus response.
- HHS then focused on its efforts to ensure the supply chain of the health care system remains in tact to serve both the upsurge in medical needs resulting from the spread of COVID-19, as well as to maintain the level of care necessary for those already engaged in the health care system.
- Along these lines, HHS noted it is taking a particular focus on elder care facilities and nursing homes, which care for some of the most vulnerable to this disease. For example, HHS is delivering

personal protective equipment to support public health efforts in affected regions in Washington state.

- HHS is also working with manufacturers, distributors, and suppliers to understand what challenges they might encounter with supply chain disruptions they may incur as a result of the events in China.

Department of Homeland Security (DHS)

- DHS officials stated it is reasonable to wonder whether travel restrictions will increase as the virus continues to spread. Though they stated there are no current plans to do so, they also stated this could change rapidly. Again, officials stated this is especially complicated given that those traveling to afflicted areas may experience significant difficulties re-entering the U.S. Certain areas where there are “hotspots” of virus emergence could necessitate additional travel restrictions, officials stated.
- DHS also acknowledged that the emergence of the virus is already impacting airlines and cruise lines, with airlines already taking flights down because demand for international travel to afflicted countries is dropping. Agency officials stated it would prefer to see an informed marketplace making these decisions rather than the government mandating what people can or cannot do.
- DHS officials also urged businesses to utilize video teleconferencing or postponing scheduled conferences to later in the year.
- The agency spoke to efforts to continue allowing imported economic goods to enter the U.S. while preserving the health of the nation. The Coast Guard in particular is engaged in port-specific activities to allow freighters to enter the U.S. and to bring cargo in while not allowing crew to disembark if there is a potential they are carrying the virus.
- Last, the agency recommended that private businesses engage in quarantining efforts, recommending they should encourage or even require employees who are sick or returning from travel to stay home and telework. It also emphasized the importance of corporate leaders leading by example, stating that they should work from home if they are sick as well in order instill confidence in staff members that they too should remain at home if ill or potentially ill.

State Department

- State Department officials noted that their priority is to protect the safety of U.S. citizens, especially those overseas. They are engaging with foreign governments to coordinate on preventing the spread of the virus. They also spoke to how foreign embassies and consulates assist in reporting on virus-related activities in foreign nations that are less transparent with sharing information.
- The State Department also strongly encouraged individuals to continually check travel information for planned areas for travel, including for potential layovers.

Department of Transportation (DOT)

- The DOT stated the biggest success of the U.S. response to the virus to date has been the travel restriction from China. The DOT is continuing to tailor travel restrictions for new regions as the virus continues to spread.

Department of Treasury

- Treasury officials stated it is too early to speculate what is going to happen to the U.S. economy in the coming weeks and months, but they expressed overall confidence in the underlying strength of the economy. They pointed to low unemployment rates, business optimism, and consumer confidence as driving their belief that the U.S. economy can “weather the shock” of the virus’ impacts.
- Officials further noted they are working “closely with Congress” on an emergency funding package to respond to the virus. They expect to see legislation in the House imminently and in the Senate over the coming weeks.