



Written by [Dennis Behrendt](#) on March 14, 2020

FedGov Coronavirus Response: National Emergency, House-passed Big-spending Bill

In an extraordinary press conference during an early Spring afternoon in the White House Rose Garden on Friday, March 13, President Trump, surrounded by the vice president, federal agency heads, and industry leaders, announced the declaration of a national emergency to fight the spread of the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV2, the agent that causes the sometimes serious disease COVID-19.



Among the measures to be taken under emergency declaration, the president said he would waive interest on federal student loans, that the United States would buy oil to top off reserves, and that states should set up emergency operation centers immediately. Working with private companies, the president indicated that testing capabilities would be expanded with over five million tests to be available in a week and that drive-thru test sites would be made available at major retailers like Walmart and Target.

During the White House press conference, [Walmart CEO Doug McMillon said](#) that his company is “eager to do our part to help serve the country.”

“We’ve been asked to make [portions of our parking lot available in select locations](#) in the beginning and scaling over time as supply increases, so that people can experience the drive-through experience that the president described,” McMillon continued.

Also as part of the national emergency announcement, President Trump noted that Google would be building and launching a website designed to help people find coronavirus test locations.

“Google is helping to develop a website, it is going to be very quickly done, unlike websites of the past, to determine whether a test is warranted and to facilitate testing at a nearby convenient location,” the [president announced](#). Vice President Pence underscored the expected quick availability of the site: “By this Sunday evening we’ll be able to give specific guidance on when the website will be available. You can go to the website, as the president said, you type in your symptoms and be given direction whether or not a test is indicated. And then at the same website you’ll be directed to one of these incredible companies that are going to give a little bit of their parking lot so that people can come by and do a drive-by test.”

During the press conference, Dr. Deborah Birx, the U.S. global AIDS coordinator and U.S. Special Representative for Global Health Diplomacy, an accomplished and well-respected medical professional, held up a placard detailing how the new website would work. Not long after the press conference, however, Google subsidiary Verily, the branch of the company actually building the site, [contradicted the administration’s announcement](#).

Taking to Twitter, Google Communications published a statement from Verily reading: “We are developing a tool to help triage individuals for Covid-19 testing. Verily is in the early stages of



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development, and planning to roll testing out in the Bay Area, with the hope of expanding over time.”

The apparent disconnect between the website as described by the Trump administration and that described by Google is substantial and raises questions. Clearly, if the administration felt sure enough of the plan to create large descriptive placard to be featured during the press conference, they must have felt fairly confident in the accuracy of their information concerning the site. Were they misled by Google? Were they misled by someone in the information pipeline between Google and the administration? Also, why might it take so long to build the proposed website? (Full disclosure: the author asks this question as someone who builds websites.)

The president’s emergency declaration raises yet other unknowns. While it frees up an estimated \$50 billion in funding to fight the pandemic, just what is this money going to fund? Under the [Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Act](#), federal agencies have at their disposal a wide array of powers and funding capabilities that include distribution of aid through organizations like the Red Cross and the Salvation Army, aid to states, the formation of response teams including a “System” for a “National Urban Search and Rescue Response” staffed by “System members,” and a great deal more besides.

According to the Act’s provisions, federal resources may be used for debris removal, search and rescue, emergency medical care, provision of food, the essential movement of supplies and people, construction of temporary bridges, provision of temporary facilities for schools and community services, demolition of unsafe structures, additional hazard warnings, dissemination of public information about health and safety, provision of technical assistance to states and local governments, and help to individuals with pets and service animals. All of these and much more are spelled out in the painstaking legal detail one might expect of federal legislation. Notably, there are likely many places within the act where nefarious behavior and unnecessary expenditures might be hidden, again, not unlike most other expansive bits of federal legislation.

Following the presidential declaration of a national emergency, on Saturday morning the Democrat-controlled House of Representatives passed [H.R. 6201](#), a broad package of financial aid for the fight against coronavirus by a vote of 363-40. The measure still has to be taken up by the Senate where House minority leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) said he expected it to pass. “I do believe it will get through as the president says he wants to sign it,” McCarthy said according to Vox.com.

The “Families First Coronavirus Response Act” is a potpourri of extra spending for entitlements, including additional monies for the “Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children” (WIC) program and for the “Commodity Assistance Program” as well as a wide variety of other measures. These include mandating that the Secretary of Labor “promulgate an emergency temporary standard to protect” healthcare and other as yet undesignated workers “from occupation exposure to SARS-CoV-2; unemployment benefits for certain workers impacted by Covid-19 or related quarantines; and, the headline measure of the legislation, requiring insurers to provide coverage and “not impose any cost sharing (including deductibles, copayment, and coinsurance) requirements or prior authorization or other medical management requirements” for COVID-19 testing and for “Health care provider office visits, urgent care center visits, and emergency room visits that result” in COVID-19 testing.

How the measure will fare in the Senate remains to be seen. Before the House vote Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell criticized House Democrats. It appears, [he said](#), “that they chose to produce an ideological wish list that was not tailored closely to the circumstances. One is reminded of the



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famous comment from President Obama's first chief of staff: "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste."

Photo of President Trump: AP Images



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