

AMERICA WILL LEARN FROM COVID-19

It has now been sixteen days since President Trump declared a National Emergency due to the corona virus pandemic. The number of US cases of COVID-19, and the deaths, have risen dramatically since then with no signs of slowing down. Mississippi and 47 other states have declared their own state of emergency.

The US stock market is being battered as our national economy, based heavily on service work, suffers a massive and dramatic slowdown.

In this crisis, we need real experts like those at the Center for Disease Control and National Institutes of Health for guidance, not so much politicians and talking heads. And we can and should learn from other countries.

When South Korea and Japan looked at China at the start of 2020 and saw their corona outbreak, those leaders got the best medical and public health experts together and took their advice. Companies ramped up production of diagnostic tests for the new virus, plus face masks and other protective equipment for health care workers. Both countries then began a massive public health effort to screen people for COVID-19, and to tell everyone to stay home to stop the virus's spread. It worked, and these two countries have seen rapid spread of the disease stop.

Italy, where the number of deaths now surpasses China's, is warning the US to learn from their example. Italian doctors advise the US to decentralize treatment and manage more patients at home with home visits. Assume everyone with a fever and any other COVID-19 symptoms has the virus and isolate them from others to keep the infected from spreading the disease. Recognize that this virus can spread in hospitals, and put top priority on protecting the health care professionals who work there.

If the US manages to slow the disease down soon, it will be because most Americans continue to stay home and radically limit their social interactions as experts advise. This virus attacks indiscriminately, and people can get infected and spread the disease without knowing it. Those with symptoms really need to stay away from other people because anybody they contact can catch it and spread it further.

COVID-19 is doing plenty of damage even with social distancing. Many US hospitals, including Mississippi hospitals, are scrambling to get enough ventilators and protective equipment for their health care professionals as the number of the seriously ill goes up. And especially in states like Mississippi that did not expand Medicaid, there will be more and more people hospitalized who have no health insurance and no way to pay their bill.

It is time for the long-festering political argument over health insurance coverage for all Americans to face reality. Covering everyone not only helps people get health care when they need it, it also ensures hospitals and doctors get paid for caring for the seriously ill and are prepared to do so in the face of an emergency.

Our now 44 million fellow Americans without health insurance are just one indication of the US's widening income inequality. Too many working families can barely cover basic expenses, including food to feed their families. Too many have no financial cushion when something like a COVID-19 lay-off happens. Too much wealth concentrated at the very top, with not enough for the majority of Americans, turns out to be a risk to the overall economy.

The bill passed by Congress last week addresses the immediate problem of helping Americans get through the economic crisis with \$1,200 checks for most adults and \$500 checks for children. It bolsters unemployment insurance, includes \$150 billion for US hospitals, and sends money to cities and states. There is also \$500 billion to back up the Federal Reserve and provide loans to businesses, with oversight and transparency. If small businesses keep their employees on payroll, their federal loans will be forgiven.

We are already learning from this crisis. God willing, we will see it through and come out stronger on the other side.

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