

U.S. Virus Plan Anticipates 18-Month Pandemic and Widespread Shortages

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By **Peter Baker** and **Eileen Sullivan**

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WASHINGTON — A federal government plan to combat the coronavirus warned policymakers last week that a pandemic “will last 18 months or longer” and could include “multiple waves,” resulting in widespread shortages that would strain consumers and the nation’s health care system.

The 100-page plan, dated Friday, the same day President Trump declared a national emergency, laid out a grim prognosis for the spread of the virus and outlined a response that would activate agencies across the government and potentially employ special presidential powers to mobilize the private sector.

Among the “additional key federal decisions” listed among the options for Mr. Trump was invoking the Defense Production Act of 1950, a Korean War-era law that authorizes a president to take extraordinary action to force American industry to ramp up production of critical equipment and supplies such as ventilators, respirators and protective gear for health care workers.

“Shortages of products may occur, impacting health care, emergency services, and other elements of critical infrastructure,” the plan warned. “This includes potentially critical shortages of diagnostics, medical supplies (including PPE and pharmaceuticals), and staffing in some locations.” P.P.E. refers to personal protective equipment.

The plan continued: “State and local governments, as well as critical infrastructure and communications channels, will be stressed and potentially less reliable. These stresses may also increase the challenges of getting updated messages and coordinating guidance to these jurisdictions directly.”

The plan, which was unclassified but marked “For Official Use Only // Not For Public Distribution or Release,” was shared with The New York Times as Mr. Trump escalated his efforts to curb the spread of the virus. After weeks of playing down the seriousness of the pandemic, saying it would miraculously disappear, Mr. Trump began shifting to a more sober tone during a news conference on Friday announcing the national emergency.

Much of the plan is bureaucratic in nature, describing coordination among agencies and actions that in some cases have already been taken, like urging schools to close and large events to be canceled. But its discussion of the Defense Production Act came as lawmakers and others urged Mr. Trump to invoke its powers.

“While the administration’s response has so far lacked the urgency this crisis has called for, there are still steps you can take to mitigate the damage,” Senator Bob Menendez, Democrat of New Jersey, wrote in a letter to Mr. Trump on Tuesday. “Invoking the powers vested in the DPA will enable the federal government to step up and take the type of aggressive steps needed in this time of uncertainty.”

Another letter sent last week by 57 House Democrats led by Representative Andy Levin of Michigan made similar points: “During World War II, our country adapted to the demands of the time to produce mass quantities of bombers, tanks, and many smaller items needed to save democracy and freedom in the world. We know what the demands of this time are, and we must act now to meet these demands.”

Senator Jack Reed, Democrat of Rhode Island, said that Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper told him on Tuesday that the Pentagon would provide federal health workers with five million respirator masks and 2,000 specialized ventilators. “The American public is on wartime footing in terms of battling the spread of this disease, and the Pentagon has to be part of the effort to help protect the health and safety of the American people,” Mr. Reed said.

But Mr. Trump said on Tuesday that he was not ready to invoke the Defense Production Act. “We’re able to do that if we have to,” he told reporters. “Right now, we haven’t had to, but it’s certainly ready. If I want it, we can do it very quickly. We’ve studied it very closely over two weeks ago, actually. We’ll make that decision pretty quickly if we need it. We hope we don’t need it. It’s a big step.”

Passed in 1950 shortly after American troops went to war defending South Korea against an invasion from North Korea, the Defense Production Act was based on powers used during World War II and authorized the president to require businesses to prioritize and accept contracts necessary for national defense.

Over the years, its scope has been expanded to include domestic preparedness and national emergencies. A president can make direct loans or loan guarantees and purchase commitments, subsidies or other incentives to influence industry to help in times of crisis.

Other key decisions outlined as options for the president include distributing medical supplies and equipment from the Strategic National Stockpile, providing money to states to help them meet demands caused by the coronavirus outbreak and prioritizing the distribution of essential resources to focus on areas most in need.

“The spread and severity of Covid-19 will be difficult to forecast and characterize,” the government plan said. It warned of “significant shortages for government, private sector, and individual U.S. consumers.”

Peter Baker is the chief White House correspondent and has covered the last four presidents for The Times and The Washington Post. He also is the author of five books, most recently “Impeachment: An American History.”
[@peterbakernyt](#) • Facebook

Eileen Sullivan is the morning breaking news correspondent based in Washington. She previously worked for The Associated Press for a decade, covering homeland security, counterterrorism and law enforcement. She was part of a team that won a Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting in 2012. [@esullivannyt](#)