



**EPISODE TRANSCRIPT**

# Topher Spiro on State and Local Government Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic

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[Upbeat theme music plays]

**ED CHUNG:** Hi, everyone. I'm Ed Chung, one of your co-hosts for "The Tent" podcast, your place for policy, politics, and progress. We're coming to you with a special episode on some of the developments around COVID-19. Now, the country as a whole, as well as different states and localities, are dealing with this crisis. But first of all, Daniella and I would hope that you all are safe, that you're washing your hands, practicing social distancing, and really just taking this pandemic, this crisis, very seriously. We know that you may be going stir-crazy if you're working from home, and maybe your kids are with you because schools are closed and canceled. But we're hoping that you're finding ways to be healthy, both physically and mentally.

In a second, you'll hear a short conversation that I had with our colleague Topher Spiro, who leads the Health Policy team at the Center for American Progress. Topher and his team over the weekend put out a report on the immediate and drastic steps that state governments must put into action to try to stem the tide and the number of people exposed to COVID-19. We recorded this episode on Monday afternoon, and right afterward, President Trump held a press conference during which, for the first time, he acknowledged that we as a country will likely not have a handle on COVID-19 until at least the summer. And needless to say, it would've been really helpful if this administration had been that serious and that realistic several weeks ago instead of downplaying the crisis and handling it more like a public relations issue instead of a public health crisis and the pandemic that it actually is.

But countries are starting to take more drastic measures. And we've seen South Korea, for example, really be on the leading edge by making tests widely available and really being innovative in the way that they're responding. France and Canada just recently announced that they're going to be on lockdown. And the stock markets have responded really negatively, obviously, over the last couple of weeks. And just on Monday, they plunged, with the Dow closing nearly 13 percent, even after the Fed

announced emergency measures right before the markets opened this week. But the consequences of not taking drastic measures could be really dire. And the surgeon general on Monday warned that the United States could be the next Italy, where there are over 27,000 cases and over 200 deaths, 368 of them in just the past 24 hours.

We don't know the degree of harm caused by the White House's delay in heeding the advice of public health experts from around the globe to take this pandemic seriously. So, we can only hope that our collective action from this point forward and the dedicated work of our first responders, nurses, doctors, hospital support staff, and other dedicated public servants will help contain the spread of the virus and minimize its impact as much as possible. We're covering all of this and more with Topher Spiro. And here's my conversation with him now.

[Theme music rises, then slowly fades out]

Topher, thanks so much for joining us on "The Tent." This weekend, you and your team, along with Dr. Zeke Emanuel, whom we recently had on the pod, put out a report on what governments should be doing immediately to ensure that the trend lines of people infected by COVID-19 flattens out. What were some of those recommendations and who did you direct them toward?

**TOPHER SPIRO:** So, we put out recommendations on Saturday for state and local governments to take aggressive action, because we know that at the federal level, President Trump's response has been bungled. And so, only state and local leaders at this point can slow the spread of the pandemic and, quote-unquote, flatten the curve. What we recommended was a series of recommendations on social distancing. So, banning all gatherings of more than 50 people, banning all concerts, conferences, sporting events, closing schools in jurisdictions with community spread. And by community spread, I mean when there's at least one case where the source of the infection is unknown, so you've got it spreading in the community. We also said close all gyms, bars, movie theaters, libraries, community centers, again, in jurisdictions with community spread, at least one unknown source. Limiting restaurants to half of their legal capacity in jurisdictions with community spread.

And so, we put forward all of these recommendations, again, to flatten the curve. We looked at some of the evidence behind modeling of this pandemic. If we do nothing on our current course, the model suggested that at the peak of the outbreak, there could be 9.4 million cases. And that translates into about 5 percent of those require intensive care beds because they're severe cases. So, that translates into 470,000 people who need intensive care beds throughout the U.S. The problem is we only have 98,000 intensive care beds. So, there's a massive shortage. So, we need to flatten that peak in order to avoid overwhelming our health care system.

So, the aggressive measures that we are recommending, if we do that kind of intervention, the model finds that the number at the peak infected could be reduced to 513,000 people. And so, again, that translates into 5 percent of those require intensive care beds. So, that's lowered to 26,650, which fits within the available supply—again, 98,000 intensive care beds in the United States. So, that was the reasoning behind the recommendations. And we did some math on why the number 50. You may be wondering, why the number 50—banned gatherings over 50 people. The math on that is that's the threshold, if you want to keep the chance of there being at least one infected person in that group below 1 percent. That's why. So, to keep the risk that small, you can't have gatherings of more than 50 people. There's a lot of complicated math behind that.

**CHUNG:** So, were you working with any specific jurisdictions? And what kind of progress have you seen in terms of states and localities implementing the policies that you recommended?

**SPIRO:** So, we put out the recommendations on Saturday. And within a day, by yesterday, by Sunday, there had been significant movement. Yesterday was a turning point, I think, and it was very encouraging. You saw some big states start to adopt either our recommendations exactly or very similar. So, you had Ohio was first, then Illinois, then California, which adopted our recommendations wholesale, Massachusetts. And then you started to see some cities, New York City, D.C., starting to get more aggressive. So, we felt like the report raised some awareness that some states we were consulting with, they put the recommendations in place. And then it sort of started to snowball, so we're very, very encouraged by that.

Now, in our report, we did catalog what states and cities had been doing before, before the turning point yesterday. And, you know, a lot of states had not been doing much. As a general matter, the states run by Republican governors are the ones that have done next to nothing. Again, as a general rule, and that is still the case. So, those are the states that are currently laggards. Now, after the actions yesterday by California, the CDC then issued its recommendations to ban gatherings of more than 50. I don't know whether our report kind of filtered into that CDC consciousness, but we were glad that it aligned with our recommendation. So, we were very happy to see that and hope and expect that states and cities will continue to put in place these bans and closures, because every day at this point makes a huge difference, if you look at the modeling. Even one day can change the trajectory of the spread.

**CHUNG:** What developments will you be looking for going forward? What are the indicators that you're going to be on the lookout for in the coming days and weeks?

**SPIRO:** I think one thing that we're going to be watching going forward is, as I mentioned before, it's the states run by Republican governors that have been lagging so far. And I would be very interested to see if they start to act and how long it takes them to act. One thing that we're going to be trying to do, in terms of indicators going forward,

is we've basically set up this big natural experiment where we've got a handful of big states, as I mentioned before—California, Illinois, Ohio—that have put in place aggressive restrictions, you know, starting today. And then you've got a bunch of states that've done nothing. And what I'd like to do is to look at the trends in cases in each group of states and compare the two. And, you know, I think what we'll see is that the aggressive measures put in place by some states yesterday, you know, as they start to take hold, we would expect to see the trending cases start to come down. That may take a week or two, probably two weeks. But that's what we expect to see. And hopefully, if we can identify that relationship then, and if we identify it early enough, then we can use that as evidence to go to the states that've not done anything so far and say, "Look, this is working. And if you don't do this now, you're going to be on a trajectory that, you know, will lead you to northern Italy." So, that's the main thing that we're, I think we're going to be tracking going forward.

[Theme music fades back in]

**CHUNG:** All right. Thanks so much, Topher. Again, go to [AmericanProgress.org](https://AmericanProgress.org) to read the report. And we'll be back with our regularly scheduled episode on Thursday. So, be sure to download and subscribe and follow us on Twitter @TheTentPod, that's @TheTentPod, to get updates. Be safe, everyone.

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