

# The United States Urgently Needs a “Whole of Country” Response to the Coronavirus

*Reta Jo Lewis*

The past weeks have shown that local leaders in the United States are bearing the brunt of the response to the coronavirus pandemic. While their efforts have been commendable, the actions of the federal government have largely been an impediment to the ongoing public-health crisis. The country needs to act, and it needs to act quickly and as one. Now is not the time for bargaining and setting states up against one another to compete for life-saving medical supplies. It is not the time for governors to be negotiating with each other. The states need help from the federal government—fast.

Listening to a U.S. governor tell his citizens the unvarnished truth about what they are facing is reassuring. The prime example of this is New York’s Governor Andrew Cuomo, who has calmly communicated the measures the state is taking to keep its residents safe. He has repeatedly outlined what New York local and county governments will be called on to do to help their communities through this period. Moreover, Cuomo has been frank and outspoken about his state’s need for assistance from the federal government.

## States Do the Best they Can

New York is just one of many states with a dire need for federal intervention. The leadership of the governors of Arizona, California, Connecticut, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Michigan, Maryland, and Ohio—some of which states are home to the largest cities in the country—has been impressive, but it is not enough. States have been doing the best they can with the hands they have been dealt. The work of stopping the spread of the coronavirus throughout the country cannot be done in a piecemeal fashion.

The country’s state and local leaders, who are on the frontline, are pleading for or imploring President Donald Trump to lead. Cuomo and other governors are straightforward with their plans of action, but they require the aid of the federal government to fully implement programs to help their states. Without coordination between states and the federal government, governors and other leaders simply cannot access the resources and best practices required to mitigate the effects of the coronavirus. Local leaders have all hands on deck, but they still need help. Governors cannot be making disjointed, cross-purpose efforts to reach the president, his staff, Congress, big business, the non-profit community, and manufacturers. Local leaders need representation on Trump’s daily task force, instead of trying to shoehorn their way into a meaningful discussion at the federal level.

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There must be a revamped effort for coordinated interstate and intergovernmental relations in the United States. In other countries the national and local levels are already working in concert to stifle the spread of the virus; the United States needs to follow this united approach.

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Local governments are privy to this imperative. This week has seen the first attempts by state governments to practice a coordinated approach to public health during the pandemic. Multi-state councils have formed in the northeast and on the west coast. The governors from Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island have organized to combat the coronavirus and get the economy back on its feet. In California, Oregon, and Washington, governors have done the same. Such councils are the seeds of a collective approach that uses expert knowledge in public health, rather than partisan interest, to protect their citizens. These governors are putting a “stronger together” approach into practice so that they may fill the void left by the federal government. Up until recently, the leaders of local governments have been at worst greatly unequipped for this pandemic, and at best uncoordinated. These multi-state pacts are a sign of solidarity, but at this point, they represent just a fraction of the country. Such cooperation is still one step removed from a national approach.

### **National Measures Needed**

While states still vary in their rates of infection and their capacity to handle the influx to hospitals, a disjunctive approach to managing the situation nationally negates the measures taken by local shutdowns. Countries such as Singapore and Taiwan, as well as Hong Kong, have swiftly brought the coronavirus under control through immediate national measures, such as increasing testing capacity and converting facilities into quarantine zones. The United States must go as far as it can to enact decisive measures, whether that is through the full enactment of the Defense Production Act (DPA), a national lockdown, or mass testing. Alongside federal powers such as the DPA, a united approach will allow state and city governments to harmonize their efforts and allow the federal government to equitably distribute medical resources to overcome the pandemic. For now, multi-state efforts will have to play that part.

The situation is urgent, and without a symbiotic relationship with the federal government, the successes of leadership at the state and local levels will be undermined by a lack of coordination in large scale public-health efforts. The future of the relationship that local government leaders have with the federal government is at stake. Big-city mayors and governors are asking for a “whole of government” approach that includes them and a “whole of country” approach that includes the American people.

We can only begin to speculate as to the future of state-federal politics as a consequence of the pandemic. The question of federal and state coordination is more present than ever, but first and foremost, it is clear that public-health efforts at both levels must work together to avoid the worst of this situation. We must hope and urge for the federal powers to realize this sooner than later.

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