

The COVID Communication Breakdown

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On paper, the U.S. federal government was well prepared for COVID-19. Personnel tasked with emergency preparedness held posts at the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the National Security Council. The executive branch had budget authority to supply the Strategic National Stockpile. There was a “pandemic playbook” for dealing with high-consequence infectious diseases.

By any measure, though, the federal government botched its response to COVID-19. It mobilized slowly for a disease that was spreading rapidly. It bungled testing, first allowing no one to administer any tests while the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tried to develop its own, and then allowing virtually any vendor to offer tests, without verifying their effectiveness. It allowed U.S. nationals to return to the United States from high-risk areas, and then turned away people arriving from low-risk areas, leaving returning passengers to exchange germs in long lines at unprepared airport points of entry. Federal officials were slow to learn that the Strategic National Stockpile lacked protective equipment, ventilators, and syringes. They were slower still to realize that no one else had them, either—and that the supply chains for procuring more equipment were inflexible and vulnerable.

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