

Senate Committee on Finance

Gradually and Safely Re-Opening the Economy

May 6, 2020

Streamed on Senator Toomey's [YouTube Channel](#)

Purpose

The purpose of this roundtable discussion was to consider re-opening the economy and the implications it would have moving forward.

Members Present

Senators Toomey, Cassidy, and Portman.

Witnesses

Mr. Mark McClellan, Former Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services Administrator, Professor of Business, Medicine and Policy and Founding Director of the Duke University's Duke-Margolis Center for Health Policy

Mr. Paul Romer, Economics Professor at New York University and Co-Recipient of the 2018 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences

Mr. Steven Shapiro, Executive Vice President, Chief Medical and Scientific Officer and President of the Health Services Division at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, and Member of the Food and Drug Administration's Pulmonary-Allergy Drugs Advisory Committee

Mr. John Ioannidis, Professor of Medicine, Epidemiology, and Population Health, Professor of Biomedical Data Sciences and Statistics, and Co-Director of Meta-Research Innovation Center at Stanford University

Opening Statements

Sen. Toomey said that America has never before chosen to close down the economy, and there is no playbook on how to reopen the economy. The main reason to close everything down was to avoid a surge in case numbers that would lead to overwhelming hospitals. The shutdown has imposed a massive cost. Massive government spending is not a substitute for stimulating an economy. The Senate Finance Committee is discussing how to gradually open the economy, safely.

Testimony

Mr. McClellan said that America has taken steps to protect its people from this virus, but it has come at a large economic cost. It is important for the public to be confident in their ability to protect themselves on a day-to-day basis by social distancing and reducing unnecessary outings. In a recent report, key efforts of reopening the economy were highlighted such as enhancing testing and tracing capacity, improving syndromic surveillance, increasing the role for businesses, and the importance of rapid response.

Mr. Romer said that he now supports a plan for \$100 billion a year for testing for viral pathogens even though he would not have a year ago because other options are dramatically worse. The key is to fight this virus by finding a sustainable method. A few options are population scale testing or predicting who is likely to be infected and test them. He said that he is

more inclined to population testing. That way, people could show their test results before interacting with one another yet go about their daily lives, safely.

Mr. Shapiro said most hospitals shifted rapidly to combat this virus. They saw a steady flow of patients, but never a surge. The median age of a COVID-19 patient for them is 84 years. He stated that testing of all patients, even when asymptomatic, has proven to be effective. It is true that children could be asymptomatic, but keeping seniors and other vulnerable populations isolated could prevent the number of deaths.

Mr. Ioannidis said that interventions should be backed by data as the country moves forward to reopen. This virus has been compared to influenza, however, asymptomatic cases are common with this virus. The second wave can only be speculated with mathematical models and most models have been inaccurate in predicting COVID-19 thus far. Lifting lockdowns and implementing new protocols will need to be done with extreme caution. Vaccines and treatments are crucial for a virus of this type because of the high level of contamination.

Questions and Answers

Sen. Toomey asked about the healthcare cost that society incurs when we prevent elective procedures. **Mr. Shapiro** said that studies have shown that more people are dying from causes other than COVID-19, so preventing elective surgeries because of COVID-19 could have adverse effects. **Sen. Toomey** asked about the mental health impact of isolation, loneliness, and unemployment. **Mr. Shapiro** said that many experts have researched the correlation among these diseases of despair and mental health, and it is important to note the adverse effects of isolation. **Sen. Toomey** asked if the number of deaths reported are misleading because some people have been deemed to have died of COVID-19 when there is no positive test. **Mr. Ioannidis** said yes, it is likely that there is under-counting and over-counting. It is speculated that people have died due to COVID-19.

Sen. Cassidy asked if America should wait to see an inflection rate below one. **Mr. Ioannidis** said that more reliable data needs to be available because the numbers currently could be inaccurate in representing incidence. **Sen. Cassidy** asked about micro-communities that are vectors of this disease, for example schools. **Mr. Ioannidis** said that he believes it is good to open up schools, with monitoring and tracing. There is no way to know for sure, but America does have bed capacity. **Sen. Cassidy** asked if it was complimentary to have widespread testing and also be documenting who is tested. **Mr. McClellan** said yes, more information is better to help people make decisions. However, we need to make sure individual information is still protected. **Mr. Romer** said that decision-makers at all levels have access to information that could guide their decisions. **Sen. Cassidy** asked about the advantages of state-wide reopening versus regional reopening. **Mr. McClellan** said that Texas was able to use a state-wide reopen because they had relatively low cases, which provided more flexibility. But health advisors are crucial in this decision.

Sen. Portman asked for more information about population testing. **Mr. Romer** said there would need to be 23 to 25 million tests per day if everyone in the U.S. was to be tested every day every 2 weeks. It can be very helpful, because everyone wants to open up but is worried. **Sen. Portman** asked about the implications and concerns about reopening nursing homes, bars, movie

theaters, etc. **Mr. Shapiro** said that his area has seen a relatively low prevalence rate and does not think an uptick in testing will be as resourceful as it would be in places like New York. Monitoring the number of cases and keeping the prevalence low, regionally, is important. **Mr. McClellan** said that additional funding relief for healthcare providers would be important because even holding on to staff is difficult right now, let alone population health capabilities to help get the economy moving safely.

Sen. Toomey asked about the witnesses' thoughts on reopening overall, considering the progress America has already made. **Mr. Shapiro** said that since the prevalence level has been low, he is optimistic. But isolation is still necessary for the more vulnerable populations. **Mr. McClellan** said that he would call it cautious optimism at this point. There has been progress, but if things are not done right, there could be a resurgence. Healthcare cannot go back to the way it used to be, so supporting providers going forward is necessary. **Mr. Ioannidis** said it needs to be done one step at a time. There is no certain answer. **Mr. Romer** said there needs to be a balance between opening up and being cautious in everyday activities. He suggested testing and isolation could be a solution.