



**City of Seattle**  
Mayor Jenny A. Durkan

**Written Testimony of Seattle Mayor Jenny A. Durkan**  
U.S. House of Representatives Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis  
“Supporting America’s Cities: What Mayors Need to Safely Reopen”  
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Thank you, Chairman Clyburn, Ranking Member Scalise and members of the Select Committee. It is an honor to speak with you about Seattle’s experience during this unprecedented time in our nation’s history.

My testimony today has been forged by nearly three months of harsh truths from fighting the devastating consequences of COVID-19 at the original epicenter of the crisis.

We are still in the first months of what could be a long battle until we get a vaccine or effective treatment. This period and the choices we make will be as consequential for Seattle, and our country as any time in our history.

This historic crisis has touched people in every city and state in America. In just months, the virus has taken more American lives than ten years of the Vietnam war. It has destroyed jobs and businesses and has laid bare the deep inequities in our society.

This generational crisis deserves and demands a generational, unified federal response.

Because we have lacked that coordinated federal response thus far, Mayors and Governors were required to create their own playbooks and to compete against each other for vital tools and equipment just to keep their health care workers safe and residents alive.

It is frankly unfathomable to me why we have not used every tool and power to harness these strengths at the national level.

I believe America is better than that.

I understand this hearing is not solely focused on early federal failures, particularly around testing, that left America unprepared and gave the virus a preventable advantage.

But it is said that those that do not learn from history, are doomed to repeat it.

And I worry we are not correcting some of the early failures that we saw firsthand in Seattle.

I fear more Americans will lose their lives and their livelihoods if Congress and this administration does not act urgently.

Prior to the pandemic, we were one of the fastest growing cities in the country and had a booming economy, powered by some of the world's leading companies and by tens of thousands of small businesses. Seattle is proud to be a national leader: innovative, dynamic, and inclusive.

All of that changed three months ago today, when COVID-19 struck unexpectedly. Federal testing failures hid the spread in our community.

Our local scientists and health officials raised alarm bells, urging us to act quickly.

We did, faster than nearly any city and region in the country.

In many ways we were fortunate. Elected leaders and public health officials have collaborated without regard to politics. I owe a debt to Governor Jay Inslee, our King County Executive Dow Constantine and my fellow Washington state Mayors.

We are home to some of the world's leading minds in science who helped us understand how widespread the virus was and how we could respond. We have engaged and been responsive to businesses, who have been great partners throughout this crisis. And the people of Seattle are unmatched in their strength, caring and willingness to act for the good.

These collective actions led to flattening the curve, and saved thousands of lives. Our hospital system did not become overwhelmed. I could not be prouder of Seattle, our county and our State for showing what can do together.

Today Seattle has some of the lowest number of cases of major U.S. cities.

But these restrictive measures have been tough on workers, small business, and families struggling to make ends meet. This pandemic has laid bare the systemic inequities in our country.

But Seattleites, like so many Americans, are weary.

And their suffering is real.

In the initial days of the virus, Seattle created and scaled new programs including:

- An eviction moratorium for residents, small businesses, and non-profits to provide relief for working people;
- Expediting utility payment assistance and deferring utility payments for customers impacted by COVID-19;
- Providing thousands of families and workers with \$800 in grocery vouchers;
- Creating meal delivery programs for tens of thousands of seniors;
- Opening emergency childcare classrooms to help hundreds of kids of essential workers.

- Announcing a small business relief package that included deferred business taxes and a stabilization fund;
- Distribution of PPE and facial coverings;
- Creating a new Arts Recovery Package to provide immediate financial relief to artists and cultural organizations that have been impacted by COVID-19;
- Providing rent relief to tenants of City-owned facilities; and
- Investing in rental assistance to help hundreds of families stay in their homes.

Some filled a short-term gap before federal relief was on its way. But all continue to be critical to meeting the basic needs of our community.

Although the City of Seattle does not operate our public health agency, we have taken an expanded role to protect the health and safety of our residents, including the most vulnerable. Testing is a critical component to slow the spread of COVID-19 because it allows individuals to self-isolate and limit their exposure to others. We know this is especially critical among health care workers, essential personnel, and vulnerable populations.

In March, the City of Seattle [launched the nation's first COVID-19 testing site, for first responders, administered by first responders](#). This has become a model in the nation. Expanding our pilot in April, the City then created and deployed Mobile Assessment Teams to test our most vulnerable, primarily focusing on senior and long-term care establishments at the forefront of the COVID-19 crisis. As reports have highlighted, the virus has disproportionately impacted long-term care facilities, which include skilled nursing facilities, adult family homes, and assisted living facilities.

Soon, the City will expand its work to even further to deploy our firefighter paramedics and firefighter EMTs to conduct community wide universal testing for the workers and residents of Seattle.

We have also focused on individuals experiencing homelessness who have an increased risk of exposure. In the first days of the crisis, we began executing a plan in partnership with King County to:

- Repurpose city buildings to serve as new, temporary shelters;
- Provide city land and resources for to stand up a quarantine and isolation facilities that provide supervised care to symptomatic or COVID-positive adults who cannot quarantine or recover in their own home, or do not have a home;
- Expedite the delivery of new units of shelter and support;
- Expand access to hygiene facilities;
- Provide PPE and testing to shelters;
- And, importantly, provided flexibility in HSD provider contracts so that City dollars can continue to provide wrap-around services and support provider operations—whether that individual is in Seattle or not.

All of these actions were taken primarily using City resources, which are limited. Since the first weeks of the crisis, I have been asking our state and federal government for more resources for mass shelter and housing for individuals experiencing homelessness.

The scale of the crisis is immense.

And we are still in the beginning stages of this crisis. As Congress considers its next actions, please remember America has the innovative power, ingenuity and strength to match and beat this virus.

This unprecedented crisis has taken more American lives than ten years of the Vietnam War. It has destroyed jobs and businesses and has laid bare the deep inequities in our society.

While we appreciate Congress' leadership in initial actions including the CARES Act, it is also clear that my city's—and our nation's—recovery will require more.

More funding, more coordination, more guidance, and more leadership.

Today, I am asking Congress and this Administration for their leadership in five areas:

**First, use the Defense Production Act to aggressively produce and distribute testing kits, PPE, facial coverings, and other critical supplies.**

In the initial months, Seattle and our region did not have the supplies we needed, and unfortunately, we still don't have the strong supply chain on PPE, facial coverings, and test kits that we need.

While we have worked with our region's top manufacturers and employers on logistics and supplies, Mayor Garcetti and I shouldn't be bidding against each other, driving up costs and risking lives. The City of Seattle spent weeks trying to procure our own test kits from South Korea. In Seattle alone, we need hundreds of thousands of testing kits to get us through the year.

This crisis is far from over. There was not then – and is still not now – a national understanding of the barriers and pathway to achieving adequate supplies in every state and locality. Without a national understanding of the gaps, we will always be reacting. Instead, we need to prepare now to meet that demand.

We need supplies and PPE to ensure our employees, like police and fire fighters and utility workers, can safely do their essential duties, and that employers don't compete with governments and health care for supplies. That's why I urge the federal government to conduct a swift stock-take of barriers in every state and locality, and create a parallel national, unified effort to urgently manufacture and procure these needed supplies.

End the scavenger hunt and Hunger Games process between states, cities, and employers.

**Second, Congress should invest in America through a bold 21st Century New Deal that creates jobs and tips the scale back to working Americans. Seattle has played an outsized role in our national economy over the last decade. We have been an economic engine creating tens of thousands of new jobs leading with innovation and home to the world's leading companies. We are well placed to lead the country in long term recovery if we have the tools.**

**We need support for: our workers, small businesses, non-profits and artists, and a plan to create jobs.**

With nearly one out of four of the workforce who has lost their jobs across America, expanded unemployment assistance has been a critical lifeline for workers in Seattle and across our region. In cities like Seattle that the cost of living exceeds most parts of the country, the additional \$600 per week the CARES Act has provided has allowed for many of our community members to continue to provide food and rent for their families. It is critical to extend access to the additional funds and provide Pandemic Unemployment Assistance to our gig workers who do not have the same social safety net that a traditional employee would have. Congress must continue this essential lifeline, and also recognize that even with unemployment assistance, far too many families are still struggling to pay their rent and will face insurmountable debt when our eviction moratoriums end. I believe undocumented Americans are an integral part of our community, who contribute to our economy just as much as anyone else and must also be supported during this unprecedented time. We need a bold plan to support our workers at this unimaginable time with a guaranteed paycheck, health care and benefits, and other essential needs like meals, childcare, and housing assistance. Any new plan for assistance for workers should also include student loan relief and forgiveness, especially for our health care workers and essential workers on the frontline of the pandemic.

Similar to the actions of the New Deal, we need a bold economic package that puts individuals back to work quickly. Seattle has been a City that prides itself in innovation in manufacturing and technology. We have developed partnerships with our labor unions and community colleges to provide apprenticeships and a trained workforce that reach our most vulnerable communities. A jobs and training package should include investing in our infrastructure to address urgent needs around transportation, internet accessibility, green technology, affordable housing, and public works that provide living wage jobs.

Across our region Seattle has led in public works projects that include transportation, electrification and the expansion of civic treasures like our waterfront. These critical infrastructure projects create living wage jobs for those most disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Federal infrastructure investments have fallen by half — from 1 percent to 0.5 percent of GDP — over the last 35 years, leaving the burden of failing infrastructure to state and local governments. More people, however, are moving to cities than ever before, placing greater and greater strain on our roads, bridges, transit systems.

With significant revenue shortfalls and the ongoing response to our community, it has forced the City to choose between our own public works projects, providing basic needs to our community and making significant cuts to the direct services the City provides. We have shovel-ready projects that will put people to work right away. From the West Seattle Bridge to expediting light rail in the entire Puget Sound to the Washington State Convention Center to the Center City Streetcar, we have hundreds of local projects that could be expedited with federal support. We just need Congress and the White House to act both through formula funding and through increased funding for discretionary programs like BUILD, INFRA, and FTA Capital Investment Grants so that we can build critical projects now as part of our economic recovery strategy.

Congress should be innovating in grants, loans and bonds required during this period for major infrastructure projects.

We also face a harsh reality that many of our small businesses may not survive. We need additional resources to support small businesses that are the economic engine and provide jobs in our community. We have heard from many of our small businesses that they aren't able to use the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) because of the terms of the loans. Congress should pass reforms to the PPP such as allowing forgiveness for expenses beyond the 8-week covered period, eliminating restrictions limiting non-payroll expenses to 25% of loan proceeds and eliminating restrictions that limit loan terms to 2 years.

Artists and arts organizations have been deeply impacted by efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19. In times of great adversity we see great leaps in creativity and innovation, and that is certainly true today. Watching Seattle's artists, cultural organizations and creative businesses pivot, transition, re-imagine and continue to create, support and uplift in the middle of a crisis has been nothing short of revelatory. We will need this passion, this creativity and this innovation to help our City and our community shape the future. And to sustain that momentum, we need Federal support to ensure that our arts and cultural institutions are not left behind.

In addition to displaced workers, our City has faced like many others the increase in automation and the job loss of some of our service and other types of industry. It is also important to ensure our workers are in a position to obtain quality jobs that are sustainable into the future, including maritime and manufacturing, health care, Information Technology, and the constructions trades. We stand ready for investments in retraining through the programs the City has partnered with our community colleges - we could provide an opportunity to our workers that will bring us back out of recovery and not fall further into a recession. Retraining is an investment that is crucial to our recovery moving forward.

**Third, Congress should help address the unforgivable crisis at our nation's senior facilities.** Nearly 70 percent of deaths in our region from COVID-19 have been in senior living facilities. Our Seattle Firefighters have personally been testing facilities to protect the safety of our residents.

This work is saving lives, and we will continue to expand it at the City level as much as we can.

In addition to regular reporting and accountability, Congress and this Administration must do more to address the crisis at these facilities including more test kits and PPE. To contain the spread of the disease, we need universal testing, including regular and frequent testing of both residents and staff.

We cannot allow our county's nursing homes to become a death sentence for the most vulnerable. Congress and this Administration must do more to address the crisis at these facilities in Seattle and around our country including providing regular testing kits, testing standards and oversight.

**Fourth, the federal government needs to lead on data standards and strategies for the disease, reopening, and contact tracing.** 50 states with 50 different battle plans will cause

more death. Decisions and metrics should be transparent, equitable, and based on real science and guidance.

We need national data standards for case management and contact tracing guided by our growing understanding of this disease. One way to do this is by having a national dashboard – like the one many of us have in our home states and cities – that shows what exactly is needed for public health capacity before we can move to the next stage of expanding social contact.

Consistent standards and metrics will be critical to see surges, spikes, or changes as we reopen and monitor the disease. Especially as more travel resumes across the country, confusion between cities and states will undo the progress we have made in Seattle and across the country. It is also important for us to fully understand the disproportionate impact the virus has had on people of color and ensure it guides our continued relief and response efforts.

I also believe the federal government should lead on training and creating a plan for a national contract tracing plan so we can deploy case managers, contact tracers, and other community health workers. It is possible we will be able to find and stop other diseases (like flu), and we will train the next generation to be more prepared for the next pandemic than we were for this one.

**Finally, cities need sustained, significant direct relief.** Cities are home to a majority of America. We are innovators and the safety net. We are your frontline in this battle and critical to success. In addition to the critical services we provide through our first responders, we are providing meals, childcare for essential workers, expanded services for seniors and individuals experiencing homelessness, testing for our residents, and emergency relief for businesses and workers.

Even with the initial CARES Act funding for local governments, we are facing two fiscal crises at the same time. On one hand the economic impacts of COVID-19 are drastically reducing the City's revenues, and on the other hand we are facing an ever-increasing demand for basic assistance, including food and shelter. Moreover, neither of these challenges will be short-lived. Current forecasts anticipate that Seattle's revenues will decline by more than \$300 million in 2020, and that they will not meaningfully recover in 2021, and only slowly after that. Meanwhile, the City has had to spend an additional \$183 million in direct response to COVID-19 to provide basic assistance, with potentially significant more resources to deploy. The economic impacts to the most vulnerable mean that the need for expanded assistance for basic food and shelter will persist into 2021 and beyond. It also means that in order to meet revenue shortfalls and continue to provide some basic needs, many of our capital projects may need to be deferred, which is the wrong economic and job creation strategy.

Right now, FEMA has committed to 75% of costs for some of our key COVID-19 activities. As many cities will have to find resources for the 25% match, our concern grows if FEMA cuts off this critical resource and lifeline. Many of the resources we are deploying have been resources that have been led by the federal government such as testing, and unfortunately, many of our COVID-19 activities are not reimbursable. Not only do local governments need the federal

government to pay 100% of costs incurred by local governments, but we need these resources to last the duration of the crisis.

The City of Seattle's economic success in the coming weeks and months is also dependent on successfully reopening and containing the virus until there is a vaccine.

As the original epicenter, we have taken a much more thoughtful approach to ensure a resurgence does not occur. Our reopening work to transition to Seattle's new normal is guided by three principles:

- We ground our work in **data and science** to understand disease transmission in our community and to inform our decisions, including when to relax restrictions and when tighten them.
- We must protect our community and care for those who are sick. This means carefully testing for and tracking the disease to isolate those who have contracted it. We are leading to stand up our own local testing and contact tracing resources. It means ensuring that our public health system and local hospitals are **ready and resourced** to meet any new surge of cases.
- We recognize that our fight against this disease will require **sustained** and **equitable** solutions. Our response must seek to protect those most impacted and displaced. We also have the unique opportunity and responsibility to rebuild our city stronger than it was before, with equity and innovation at the forefront.

As local communities and states re-open to a new normal until there is a vaccine or treatment, we know there will be challenges ahead with specific industries and workers. We know systemic challenges and inequities like in our education system will become more acute.

In the absence of Federal relief for our school districts and concerted efforts to ensure investments in higher education, COVID-19's impacts on communities of color will be deeper and longer, as cuts in school budgets disproportionately impact communities of color and low-income communities. Even in a City like Seattle that has 97% of internet access, we know that the individuals who do not have access are disproportionately communities of color.

In conclusion, when we look back on this moment in history as a nation, we will have to reckon with the decisions we make today. We are still at the beginning of this generational challenge.

In the early days of this crisis, Seattle simply did not have a strong federal partner. But it's not too late to change course.

Defeating this virus requires all of us working together. In these last months, we have seen so many acts of hope, sacrifice, resolve and courage. I am asking you to match that resolve and courage. Invest in a better America.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today.