



The World Food Program's Coronavirus Fight—and How You Can Help

The coronavirus outbreak has thrown the world into turmoil. On top of the infections and deaths it's caused, there have been significant knock-on effects on financial markets, supply chains, businesses, and livelihoods.

One of the most crucial systems we must safeguard as the crisis continues to play out is the food system. Food supply is already threatened from [various angles](#), and allowing these threats to play out would be disastrous.

The UN's [World Food Program](#) (WFP) offers food assistance to 87 million people in more than 80 countries. To make sure these programs are disrupted as little as possible, the WFP is looking to implement creative, tech-driven solutions to food supply chain, production, and delivery systems—and [innovative startups and individuals](#) can help.

Last week [Darlene Damm](#), Singularity University's Chair of Global Grand Challenges, spoke with [Bernhard Kowatsch](#), head of the WFP's Innovation Accelerator, and [Carmen Burbano](#), director of the WFP's School Feeding Division, about the actions and innovations needed to make sure the pandemic doesn't cause a breakdown in food supply, particularly for the most vulnerable.

“Because of Covid-19, the number of people at risk of dying from famine has almost doubled,” Kowatsch said. “We expect that 465 million people are at risk in 2020. This is really an acute crisis that we have to [deal with properly](#).” And, he added, we haven’t even seen the most severe impacts of Covid-19 in developing countries yet.

What’s Working

Tech used to solve a lot of problems that aren’t really problems (CES 2020, though very cool, was [replete with examples](#)). But it’s also chipping away at global challenges that truly need solving—like hunger and food supply.

“There are a lot of solutions that are only possible right now because of the spread of technology,” Kowatsch said. “And compared to just a few years ago, the cost of many technologies has come down dramatically.” These are some of the innovations that have helped the WFP feed people before and during Covid-19.

[Hunger Map LIVE](#) is a data and analysis tool that tracks food security, healthcare access, and markets in vulnerable countries in real time. An early warning system is in place for areas that slide into high risk, and the WFP is also using data from this tool to keep tabs on how the pandemic is impacting security in vulnerable places.

[Building Blocks](#) is a blockchain solution that transfers cash directly to refugees. In its first week of use it served over 10,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan, and has now been expanded to over 100,000 refugees. “People can go to a shop and buy food on blockchain, and the system is being adapted to Covid-19; instead of using a fingerprint to pay, they can use a contactless QR card,” Kowatsch said.

Instead of getting money from an ATM then using that money to go buy food, a tool called [Food ATM](#) is cutting out the middle

man. Piloted in 2019, it's currently being deployed in Sudan and elsewhere. "It does just what it sounds like it does," Kowatsch said. That is, locally-procured food commodities are monitored and dispensed on demand by machines. The machines are filled and maintained by locals the WFP trains.

School closures because of the coronavirus pandemic mean kids are missing out on education—but in developing nations and even in the US, they're also missing out on meals. Millions of children, Burbano explained, rely on schools to provide them with a healthy meal, and in many cases it's the only one they get in a day. In the 30 countries most at risk of hunger, WFP partnered with UNICEF to launch a program that repackages food into take-home rations; these are either delivered to students' homes by teachers, picked up at schools by parents, or turned into cash vouchers that are given to families.

Finally, apps like [Share the Meal](#) (in which anyone can provide a meal to someone in need by donating 50 cents through the app) and [Free Rice](#) (a word game where for every answer players get right, the WFP gets a donation of 20 grains of rice) have been a huge success, with over 2 million people donating more than 63 million meals and 202 billion rice grains donated.

What's Needed

These tools are making a difference. But to really build a high-performing system that can end hunger, Burbano said, advances in [automation](#) and data collection are going to be crucial.

For starters, WFP administrators need to be able to monitor their programs remotely in a way that's transparent and accountable, with data being the key component. "We need to be able to merge different data sets so that we can understand, at the same time, things like how much these programs are costing, who is eating what, and where there problems we need to focus on," Burbano said. In Burundi, for example, schools

are testing a web-based system called School Connect. It digitizes data entry related to school food stock inventory, student attendance, and meal consumption, which helps administrators improve supply chain planning and kids' nutrition.

Trading a one-size-fits-all approach for more custom solutions will be crucial too. Some families truly need free meals, while others can afford to pay a portion, and still others don't need assistance at all—but currently, there's not enough visibility at a household level to be able to adjust the programs accordingly.

When asked about additional issues they most need help with right now, here's what Burbano and Kowatsch listed.

- Facilitating the purchase of food from local farmers in at-risk locations: for example, how do you send cash to smallholder farmers that are selling very small quantities of food to schools?
- Managing a cash ecosystem without too much bureaucracy and making it intuitive and frictionless
- Ensuring that food being transferred between people locally is safe to eat
- Digitally monitoring children's attendance at school and supply chain stock

For all the innovators, philanthropists, global-challenge-focused startups, and caring humans out there: we've got our work cut out for us. "We're all in this together" is tired but true; let's act like it and put our money and our minds where they're needed most.

Image Credit: [WFP / Brook duBois](#)



How the Rich and Powerful Profit From Crises Like Coronavirus

ProPublica is a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative newsroom. Sign up for [The Big Story newsletter](#) to receive stories like this one in your inbox.

The “Trump, Inc.” podcast has [long explored how](#) people have tried to benefit through their proximity to the Oval Office. Our podcast with WNYC is going to continue digging into that as the Trump administration is tasked with rolling out more than \$2 trillion in bailout money.

We spoke to two people this week to help us understand the stakes. “Some policymakers sitting in the Treasury Department or some other government agency have this awesome power to say, ‘You get the money, you go out of business,’” said [Neil Barofsky](#), who served as the government’s watchdog for the 2008 bank bailout. “One of the most important things we can do is make sure that power is exercised fairly, consistently and,

most importantly, consistent with the policy goals that underlie this extraordinary outpouring of taxpayer money.”

We also spoke with journalist Sarah Chayes, a former NPR correspondent who has reported on corruption and cronyism in countries experiencing economic shock. She said powerful players often “take advantage of adversity and uncertainty to enrich themselves.”

But Chayes also described something else. She coined it “disaster solidarity.” That’s when there’s so much suffering, so much adversity, “that people’s tolerance for selfish, hogging, me-first behavior is really low.”

And that’s where *you* come in. We want your help to dig into the coming bailout. If you know something, please tell us.

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- [Trump Administration](#)



You Might Be Buying a Hand Sanitizer That Won't Work for Coronavirus

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It's tempting, especially now, to buy one of the many hand sanitizers whose label says it "kills 99.99% of illness causing germs." But that does not mean the product will protect you against the novel coronavirus.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends rubbing on hand sanitizers with at least 60% alcohol when you aren't able to [wash your hands](#). Huge pumps and multipacks of bottles are flying off store shelves. But "alcohol-free" products – which are not recommended by the CDC – are also getting snatched up in the consumer frenzy.

Some of the hand sanitizers made by the brands Purell and Germ-X rely on benzalkonium chloride instead of alcohol as the active ingredient. Such non-alcohol antiseptic products may not work as well for many types of germs, [the CDC says](#), or may merely reduce the growth of germs rather than killing them. They may be better than nothing, experts say. But people are buying them without knowing the difference.

Alcohol-Free Hand Sanitizers Are Selling Out, Despite Not Being Recommended by the CDC

These alcohol-free products are selling out, with internet price-gouging in full swing. At times, it can be hard to tell, by looking at the listings, that they're different from the kind the CDC recommends.

Purell Hand Sanitizing Wipes have jumped in price on Amazon.com from \$11.88 in January to \$79.99 on Wednesday afternoon before jumping to \$199.99 on Wednesday night, according to the price tracker Keepa.com. They are currently sold out.

The front of the package doesn't mention that it's alcohol-free; the back includes small print that lists benzalkonium chloride as the active ingredient and the label "alcohol-free formula." Nowhere on the Amazon product listing does it say it's alcohol-free.

Germ-X Alcohol-Free Foaming Hand Sanitizer is also sold out on Amazon, with prices surging from \$10 in mid-January to \$49.95 last Friday, according to Keepa.com.

On eBay, 6 fluid ounces of Purell's alcohol-free sanitizer – the equivalent of three-quarters of a cup – had a \$55 price tag on Thursday night.

Amazon officials have said they are [monitoring listings](#) for

price gouging, blocking or removing those they suspect of it. Ebay [announced Friday](#) that it was banning listings for hand sanitizers, masks and disinfecting wipes, and that it will “quickly remove” listings other than books that mention coronavirus or COVID-19, the disease it causes.

If you type in “coronavirus hand sanitizer” on Amazon, the results include hand sanitizers made by different companies that don’t contain alcohol. Amazon had not responded to questions about alcohol-free hand sanitizers by the time of publication.

Customers seem to be confused. One gave Purell’s alcohol-free, benzalkonium chloride-based hand wipes five stars, writing: “Honestly these wipes were a life saver. Due to the corona virus and me traveling to Vietnam, I bought a pack... I used these on flights, utensils before eating and seats before sitting. It gave me [a feeling] of safety...”

Alcohol-Free Hand Sanitizers Are Better Than Nothing. None Are as Good as Washing Your Hands.

At a time when all hand sanitizers are in short supply, the benzalkonium chloride products are better than nothing, said Emily Landon, an infectious diseases specialist at the University of Chicago Medicine. She said the CDC recommendation for hand sanitizers is based on the fact that 60% alcohol kills “all of the coronaviruses we know about.” A sanitizer with benzalkonium chloride as the active ingredient is “not as good,” because we don’t know as much about it, she said. As a physician, mother and infection-control expert, she

called alcohol-based products her “first choice” for hand sanitizers.

Labels for the Purell and Germ-X alcohol-free hand sanitizing products that contain benzalkonium chloride are vague about which germs they work against.

ProPublica asked Kelly Ward-Smith, the spokeswoman for Gojo Industries, the company that invented Purell, what the product labels mean when they say they kill “99% of most illness causing germs.” She declined to answer, saying in an email that because this article is about coronavirus, the FDA could interpret any answer to violate its rules. The company, which also sells hand sanitizers that contain alcohol, does not appear to be marketing any of them for protection against COVID-19.

ProPublica reached out for comment to Vi-Jon, the company that makes Germ-X, but did not get a response. They also sell alcohol-based products and also don't appear to be marketing any of their hand sanitizers for use against the novel coronavirus.

Don't Waste Your Vodka

The shortage of hand sanitizers has led consumers to take extreme measures, brewing their own elixirs of alcohol and aloe vera gel. Landon said the “homemade Pinterest recipes” she's seen are no good, as people are using whiskey or vodka that doesn't contain enough alcohol to be effective. The World Health Organization's [guidelines for making](#) hand sanitizers

require 96% ethyl alcohol.

Taking its consumer mission to heart, Tito's Handmade Vodka tweeted a [warning](#) to its customers on Thursday that its product didn't contain enough alcohol to sanitize effectively: "Per the CDC, hand sanitizer needs to contain at least 60% alcohol. Tito's Handmade Vodka is 40% alcohol."

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Millions of People Face Stimulus Check Delays for a Strange Reason: They Are Poor

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Last week, a group of angry and desperate Citi Tax Financial customers gathered outside the company's storefront in Augusta, Georgia. Millions of Americans had received a big deposit from the IRS in their bank accounts, but they had not. The IRS website told them their [coronavirus stimulus checks](#) were deposited in an account they didn't recognize.

With an officer from the Richmond County Sheriff's Office beside him and another officer shouting for people to be quiet, the tax preparation company's owner told the crowd of about 60, only a few of whom wore masks, that he didn't have their money.

Because of the baroque machinery that runs the tax preparation industry, the IRS had sent the money to a bank Citi Tax works with but the customers had not heard of. That bank sent the payments back to the IRS.

Citi Tax's clients – just like some clients of big tax brands such as H&R Block, Jackson Hewitt and TurboTax – didn't get their money for the very reason Congress wanted to get money to them quickly in the first place: They are poor. The Georgia customers, almost all black women, are among the likely millions of Americans who are having trouble getting the stimulus funds they are owed. The IRS' difficulty in swiftly getting payments to Americans has a basic, root cause: There are multiple [private actors sitting between](#) the IRS and tax filers.

“Because we have an entire industry that survives on – and is a huge force in maintaining – this system in which they are third-party intermediaries, you end up with these delays and complications,” said Chi Chi Wu, an attorney at the National Consumer Law Center.

The stimulus problems are part of a constellation of pain faced by the poor in accessing CARES Act money, from the possibility [that banks could seize](#) the money to pay off debts to advocates’ fear that, when paper checks arrive, the check-cashing industry will snatch a hefty chunk.

The [tax prep business](#) is built on a complex infrastructure designed to extract fees that many customers cannot afford. When the government tried to navigate that system to speedily get cash to its citizens, it ran into big problems.

The IRS estimates that it will send the \$292 billion in CARES Act money to 171 million Americans. The first wave of payments sent out last week was targeted to less than half of those eligible: 80 million Americans whose 2018 or 2019 tax refunds had been directly deposited. To disburse most of the remaining payments, the agency is planning to mail 81 million paper checks bearing the president’s name, according to [an IRS budget document](#).

But for a large portion of the 80 million people the IRS tried to reach last week, “direct deposit” is a bit of a misnomer. Each year, the tax refunds of more than 20 million Americans, including many of Citi Tax’s customers, take a detour. These customers don’t pay their tax preparation fees upfront, instead opting to have the fee taken out of their refund. Because regulations prohibit tax prep companies from receiving

refunds directly, a special, temporary account is created at a bank that plays the middleman. The bank takes out whatever fees are owed and then passes the remainder on to the customer.

Now some of these waystation banks are sending the checks back to the IRS, saying in public statements they received them by mistake, causing significant confusion and delays. And it's possible that some of these banks will extract fees before the stimulus money makes its way to those the government was trying to help.

Citi Tax customers aren't the only ones facing problems. After ProPublica posted [a questionnaire](#) about stimulus payment problems last Friday evening, around 1,400 responses flooded in. People told us about madly refreshing the [Get My Payment page](#) from the IRS and calling their banks and tax preparers. Some said they needed the money for food. Some said they had been notified that payments went to accounts they didn't recognize. Others said they'd been told they had been paid, but the money hadn't arrived.

"My daughter and I are starving here, and we don't have much of a shelter. I don't know what we're going to do if we don't get this now," said Aaron Buckels, a cashier in Crawfordsville, Indiana.

Like many others who wrote in, Buckels depends on his tax refund every year. He was eligible to [file his taxes for free](#). Not knowing that, he did his taxes through TurboTax, which charged him \$80, according to his receipt.

He was unable to afford that upfront. So, he paid another fee, \$40 more, for TurboTax to use his refund to pay what he owed the company for preparing his return. When it came to receiving what remained of his refund, Buckels chose to have it deposited on a debit card, an option heavily promoted by TurboTax. The company pitches the Turbo Card option as a way to get refunds “fast” – but the fine print reveals that it’s only faster than a paper check. It also comes with [additional charges](#), including a \$4.95 monthly fee.

That’s where the IRS was going to send Buckels’ stimulus money, according to the agency’s Get My Payment page. But the funds haven’t arrived. Buckels was one of more than 50 TurboTax users who got both a refund transfer and a Turbo Card who told ProPublica they’d yet to receive their payments. It’s still not clear where the breakdown occurred between the IRS, the bank that handled the refund transfer and the debit card.

Despite numerous [customercomplaints](#) about delays, a spokesman for TurboTax-maker Intuit, Rick Heineman, said, “These are TurboTax customers and needed stimulus payments, so our actions reflect our efforts to deliver the funds to accounts as quickly as possible with no delay and no fees.” He added that, “The IRS is ultimately responsible for determining how and when the stimulus payments will be delivered to Americans.”

Refund transfers are a cornerstone of the tax prep industry’s business model. Because low-income filers often do not have enough money on hand to pay high preparation fees, the companies need a way to effectively front them money.

A low-income, single mother with two children pays about \$360

to have her taxes prepared at H&R Block, according to a company pricing chart. With a refund transfer (\$40), the toll rises to \$400. The equivalent cost at Jackson Hewitt, the second largest chain, would be \$610, according to an estimate provided by a company employee.

Such a customer can probably expect a tax refund in the thousands of dollars because of antipoverty tax credits, which helps dull the pain of giving up several hundred dollars for tax prep help. Refund transfers are very common across the industry. For example, almost half the customers at Liberty Tax, the third-largest chain, get a refund transfer. They are most common among taxpayers with income between \$10,000 and \$25,000, according to IRS statistics.

Refund transfers are also often sold with other products. Those include promotional cards that come with fees of their own. H&R Block's [Emerald Card](#) promises "easy access to your tax refund." But it [charges](#) users \$1.50 to check their balance; \$3 for an ATM withdrawal; a \$4.95 "inactivity" fee; and \$35 to cash out the card at a bank. Last year H&R Block reported [\\$268 million](#) in revenue from refund transfer and prepaid debit fees.

Consumer advocates argue transfers are predatory because they are essentially loans with effective annual interest rates over 200%: \$40 to \$60 in finance charges just for deferring the tax prep cost by the few weeks it takes for a refund to arrive. And although the fees are generally disclosed to taxpayers, ProPublica has heard from dozens of taxpayers who didn't understand why they were being charged or what the transfer meant.

Over the past week, the transfers emerged as a major problem for a different reason. For most taxpayers who got a refund transfer, the IRS seems to have been tripped up because it had information for two accounts, the middleman's and the final destination, instead of one. That complication has apparently been a challenge for the IRS, which Congress has [gutted with budget cuts](#) over the past 10 years.

The IRS didn't respond to questions.

In a statement to ProPublica, an H&R Block spokesperson pointed the finger at the government. The IRS has "created confusion by not always using clients' final destination bank account information for stimulus payments," the spokesperson said. "We share our clients' frustration that many of them have not yet received these much-needed payments due to IRS decisions, and we are actively working with the IRS to get stimulus payments sent directly to client accounts."

In a [new FAQ](#) on the IRS website, the agency confirmed that, "In some cases, your Economic Impact Payment may have been directed to the bank account associated with the refund settlement product or prepaid debit card."

Confusing matters even more, the agency said that there was an error on its Get My Payment website, which "inaccurately indicated rejected payments were being sent back to the same taxpayer account a second time." In fact, those payments would be mailed to tax filers, the agency said.

Among the filers affected by this additional glitch were customers of [MetaBank](#). The publicly traded South Dakota-based

firm provides refund transfers for independent tax prep storefronts like Citi Tax in Augusta. The IRS wrongly sent about 300,000 payments to MetaBank's temporary accounts, [according to](#) one of the bank's tax prep partners. Many customers say they are still waiting for their stimulus money. The bank said in a [statement](#) it is "deeply concerned" by the delays and referred users to the IRS.

Citi Tax is typical of the industry in many ways. Refund transfers are most common in the South and particularly in counties with large black populations. Richmond County, where Citi Tax is located, is majority black and about a third of taxpayers there with income under \$25,000 get a refund transfer, according to IRS data. The transfers tend to accompany returns involving the earned income tax credit, one of the country's largest antipoverty programs and one primarily targeted at low-income workers with children. This helps explain why the crowd outside Citi Tax was largely women.

Citi Tax is also a prime example of an industry that is largely unregulated. The store used to be part of the Instant Tax chain – once the fourth-largest tax prep chain in the U.S. until it was shut down in 2013 for what a Justice Department attorney [called](#) "an astonishing array of repeated fraudulent and deceptive conduct."

Under the same owner, Yonathan Michael, the Instant Tax location simply changed names and continued on. Michael himself has been hit with over \$90,000 in penalties by the IRS, according to liens filed against him over the last three years. But the IRS [lacks the authority](#) to prevent Michael from continuing to prepare hundreds of returns each year simply because of such violations. Michael did not respond to

questions from ProPublica.

Even after more than a week of confusion, many tax filers still do not have their checks and it's unclear precisely which part of the system's machinery broke down. On [Reddit](#) and Facebook, frustrated tax filers looking for answers have created groups like "[justice for Metabank Customers](#)" and "[H&R Block stimulus group](#)" that have ballooned in recent days.

Some people who wrote to ProPublica have been told to expect paper checks, despite their wish to get direct deposit. Others continue to get a payment status unknown message from the IRS website. And adding to the mess, the banks that process refund transfers are handling the problems differently. Some say they've sent payments back to the IRS, some say they will mail taxpayers checks themselves, and still others say they will send payments electronically.

Additionally, [Santa Barbara Tax Products Group](#), a subsidiary of the publicly traded [Green Dot Corporation](#), suggests on its website that fees may be taken out of stimulus payments in some cases.

"In the rare event that payments are inadvertently sent to [Santa Barbara], a plan is in place to help identify and expedite the return of these payments immediately to the IRS so that the IRS can reissue payments directly to affected taxpayers as soon as possible," the [statement](#) says. "If we are unable to identify the payment as an Economic Impact Payment, the deposit will be processed as a federal refund, with all associated fees withheld from the deposit amount."

Santa Barbara is the largest processor of refund transfers, handling them for several tax prep brands, including TurboTax. An Intuit spokesman said its customers would not be charged fees.



The TSA Hoarded 1.3 Million N95 Masks Even Though Airports Are Empty and It Doesn't Need Them

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The Transportation Security Administration ignored guidance from the Department of Homeland Security and internal pushback from two agency officials when it stockpiled more than 1.3 million N95 respirator masks instead of donating them to hospitals, internal records and interviews show.

Internal concerns were raised in early April, when COVID-19

cases were growing by the thousands and hospitals in some parts of the country were overrun and desperate for supplies. The agency held on to the cache of life-saving masks even as the number of people coming through U.S. airports dropped by 95% and the TSA instructed many employees to stay home to avoid being infected. Meanwhile, other federal agencies, including the [Department of Veterans Affairs' vast network of hospitals](#), scrounged for the personal protective equipment that doctors and nurses are dying without.

“We don't need them. People who are in an infectious environment need them. Nobody is flying,” Charles Kielkopf, a TSA attorney based in Columbus, Ohio, told ProPublica. “You don't take things for yourself. It's the wrong thing to do.”

Kielkopf shared a copy of an official whistleblower complaint he filed Monday. In it, he alleges the agency had engaged in gross mismanagement that represented a “substantial and specific danger to public health.”

TSA has not required its screeners to wear N95s, which require fitting and training to use properly, and internal memos show most are using surgical masks, which are more widely available but are less effective and lack the same filtering ability.

Kielkopf raised a red flag last month about the TSA's plan to store N95 respirators it had [been given by Customs and Border Protection](#), which found more than a million old but usable masks in an Indiana warehouse. Both agencies are overseen by DHS. That shipment added to 116,000 N95s the TSA had left over from the swine flu pandemic of 2009, a TSA memo shows. While both stockpiles were older than the manufacturer's recommended shelf life, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

said that expired masks remain effective against spreading the virus.

Kielkopf and another TSA official in Minnesota suggested that the agency send its N95 masks to hospitals in early April, records show. Instead, TSA quietly stored many of them in its warehouse near the Dallas-Fort Worth airport and dispersed the rest to empty airports across the nation.

“We need to reserve medical masks for health care workers,” Kielkopf said, “not TSA workers who are behind an X-ray machine.”

The TSA didn't provide answers to several detailed questions sent by ProPublica, but spokesman Mark Howell said in an email that the agency's “highest priority is to ensure the health, safety and security of our workforce and the American people.”

“With the support of CBP and DHS, in April, TSA was able to ensure a sufficient supply of N95 masks would be available for any officer who chose to wear one and completed the requisite training,” the statement read.

“We are continuing to acquire additional personal protective equipment for our employees to ensure both their and the traveling public's health and safety based on our current staffing needs, and as supplies become available,” TSA said.

A review of federal contracting data shows the agency has mostly made modest purchases such as a \$231,000 purchase for gallons of disinfectant, but has not reported any new

purchases of N95s.

An internal TSA memo last month said the surplus of N95s was expected to last the agency about 30 days, but the same memo noted that estimate did not account for the drastic decline in security officers working at airports. ProPublica asked how long the masks were actually going to last, accounting for the decreased staffing levels.

“While we cannot provide details on staffing, passenger throughput and corresponding operations have certainly decreased,” the TSA statement said.

The trade journal [Government Executive](#) reported this week that internal TSA records showed most employee schedules have been “sharply abbreviated,” while an additional 8,000 security screeners are on paid leave over concerns that they could be exposed to the virus.

More than 500 TSA employees have tested positive for COVID-19, [the agency reported](#), and five have died.

The CDC has not recommended the use of N95s by TSA staff, records show, but that doesn’t mean workers who have or want to wear them can’t.

In one April 7 email, DHS Deputy Under Secretary for Management Randolph D. Alles sent guidance to TSA officials, urging them to wear homemade cloth face coverings and maintain social distancing. But the N95s, which block 95% of particles that can transmit the virus, were in notoriously short supply

and should be “reserved” for health care workers.

“The CDC has given us very good information about how to make masks that are suitable, so that we can continue to reserve medical masks and PPE for healthcare workers battling the COVID-19 pandemic,” Alles wrote.

But two days later, on April 9, Cliff Van Leuven, TSA’s federal security director in Minnesota, followed up and asked why he had been sent thousands of masks despite that guidance.

“I just received 9,000 N-95 masks that I have very little to no need for,” he said in the email, which was first reported by Government Executive. “We’ve made N95s available to our staff and, of the officers who wear masks, they overwhelmingly prefer the surgical masks we just received after a couple months on back order.”

Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz had publicly asked that anyone who had PPE donate their surplus to the state’s Department of Health, Van Leuven said in the email to senior TSA staff.

“I’d like to donate the bulk of our current stock of N-95s in support of that need and keep a small supply on hand,” he wrote, adding the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport had screened fewer than 1,500 people the previous day, about a third of which were airport staff.

Van Leuven declined to comment, referring questions to a TSA spokesperson.

Later that day, Kielkopf forwarded the concerns to TSA attorneys in other field offices, trying to get some attention to the stockpile he felt would be better used at hospitals.

“I am sharing with you some issues we are having with n95 masks in Minnesota,” he wrote. “And the tension between our increasing supply of n95 masks at our TSA airport locations and the dire need for them in the medical community.”

Weeks went by, and finally, on May 1, Kielkopf wrote: “I have been very disappointed in our position to keep tens of thousands of n95 masks while healthcare workers who have a medical requirement for the masks – because of their contact with infected people – still go without.”

DHS did not respond to ProPublica’s questions about why it transferred N95 masks to TSA despite a top official saying they should be reserved for healthcare workers.

“So now the TSA position is that we desperately need these masks for the protection of our people,” Kielkopf said. “At the same time, most of our people aren’t even working. It’s a complete 180 that doesn’t make any sense.”

Do you have access to information about federal contracts that should be public? Email david.mcswane@propublica.org. Here’s how to [send tips and documents](#) to ProPublica securely.



Coronavirus Entered My Father's Nursing Home and Nobody Warned Me. I Did Not Get the Chance to Save Him.

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The call came around 9 a.m. on March 25. It was my father.

"I'm not doing too good," he said in between gasps for air. I asked him what was wrong. "I'm coughing up blood," he said, adding that the medical staff at the nursing home in the Bronx where he lived wanted to send him to a nearby hospital.

My father, 75, had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), a crippling illness that causes severe breathing difficulty and can lead to death. He had lived in nursing homes since 2017 after X-rays showed his lungs had badly deteriorated.

“Do we really have to send him to the hospital?” I asked a nursing supervisor over the phone. I worried about my father, already in poor health, waiting in an emergency room full of patients infected with the coronavirus.

What I did not know was that he already had the virus. Shortly after being admitted to the hospital, he tested positive for COVID-19. Hours later, I called the nursing home to alert the staff. A nursing home staffer told me that my father was not the first resident to test positive. He was the fourth. I was stunned.

I’m a reporter for The New York Times and have been covering the pandemic’s impact on New York City jails, including Rikers Island, and the state’s prison system.

Other journalists at the Times and elsewhere have been writing about the toll the virus was taking on nursing homes, killing hundreds of residents and infecting thousands more. As I read those harrowing stories, my dad was never far from my thoughts.

After realizing my dad’s nursing home had left me in the dark, I started to make some calls. I thought about my father’s roommate and the families of other residents at the facility who were unaware of the storm brewing inside.

I was certain I should have been alerted that the virus had been detected in the home they shared. I was wrong.

When I called the state Department of Health to complain on my

family's behalf, I was informed that nursing homes in New York – the epicenter of the crisis in the United States – were not obligated to tell families when the virus is detected in other residents.

“Guidelines require nursing home operators to notify a resident's family of illness, they do not require notification to relatives of other residents,” a Department of Health spokesman later said in a statement.

That left me even more puzzled, and not just as a daughter but as a journalist. So I emailed the state asking if the agency was weighing whether to change the policy in response to the growing crisis.

A day later the policy had changed. The Department of Health is now directing nursing home officials to tell residents and families within 24 hours of learning of a suspected COVID-19 case.

More than 6,470 nursing home residents in New York have tested positive for the coronavirus, according to the state Department of Health. The disease had killed 42% of infected nursing home residents as of Friday. The outbreak has now spread to 354 of the 613 licensed nursing homes in New York and, and in hot spots from New Jersey to Seattle, nursing home residents have been especially hard hit.

Last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that nursing home providers will soon be required to report potential infectious disease outbreaks not only to state health departments but directly to federal health

officials to accelerate efforts to contain outbreaks.

But the revised New York state guidelines came too late for my family, and for many others. My father died on April 9, due to complications from the virus, 15 days after he was admitted to the hospital.

The lack of notification deprived us of the chance to move my father out of the nursing home before he got sick. "I think that's very unfair," my father said more than a week before he died. "They have no consideration – in other words you're just cattle. It goes to show a great indifference."

My experience was not unique. My colleagues at the Times have reported that several other families said nursing homes did not tell them when a resident tested positive or what steps the homes were taking to prevent the virus from spreading. Outside of New York state, families are raising similar alarms and demanding the release of better information by governments and facilities. In recent days, Florida and California began releasing information on which nursing homes have outbreaks.

Indeed, it was only by chance that I learned my father was not the first resident at his nursing home to test positive. When I called to update the home about his test results, a staffer asked how he was doing. I sighed and told the staffer he had tested positive for coronavirus. To my surprise, the staffer said that there were others and that the facility had been slow to quarantine floors. My heart dropped. How could this have happened?

On March 12, I had received a robocall letting me know that

all medically nonessential visits to the facility had been suspended, but reassuring us that there were no cases in the facility. My father started hearing rumors from staff and residents that the virus had quietly seeped into the nursing home. One staffer told him that another staffer had fallen sick and could not work, and residents spoke about another resident who was hospitalized.

My father said he and some of the other residents were still being allowed to move around the nursing home without masks and were never warned that the virus had entered the 159-bed facility.

And while my father had symptoms of the disease – a persistent dry cough, diarrhea, fever, headaches and body aches – no one at the home, including the doctor who called to follow up with me about his persistent cough, told him or me that they suspected he might have the virus.

On March 18, I received another reassuring robocall from the nursing home. “We continue to take stringent precautions in ensuring that your loved ones remain safe,” the automated call stated. “To date, we do not have any presumed or positive cases in any of our facilities and will continue to provide you with relevant updates as they become available.”

On March 23, I emailed Aharon Wolf, the administrator of my father’s facility, Hudson Pointe at Riverdale Center for Nursing and Rehabilitation in the Bronx, asking for an update and whether the virus had made its way there. I did not get a response. Two days later my father was hospitalized and the next day tested positive for COVID-19.

After I learned my father was the fourth resident to test positive, I immediately called Wolf.

He explained that three residents had tested positive for the virus at a hospital before my father was hospitalized. A staff member at the home had also tested positive around the same time, he told me. He said that infected residents had been transferred to hospitals and were no longer in the nursing home.

It was a day after I received my father's positive test result that a staffer finally left a voicemail message to inform me that the virus was in the nursing home. Then, three days before my father died, I received another robocall from the facility stating that some residents had tested positive for COVID-19.

When I called Wolf back while reporting this story, he told me relatives were being updated and that notifying 150 families takes time.

My father fought hard to beat the virus. His condition changed every few days. At first he was stable, and then his symptoms worsened. At one point, his blood pressure dropped, and his breathing became labored.

The other times he was hospitalized with complications from his lung disease, I would drop by his hospital room after work with a hamburger and a smile. I would hug him, rub his mostly bald head and encourage him to hang in there.

This time was different. I could only talk to him over a video chat app. This virus has made it unsafe to visit our infected and dying loved ones in the hospital, leaving them isolated and alone.

I tried to keep his spirits high, reminding him he was a fighter. I played for him the songs he loved and that I grew up listening to: "Cruisin'" by Smokey Robinson and "Lovely Day" by Bill Withers.

When he had the energy, we chatted and I blew him kisses over the phone. "Hey, big guy," I'd say, to my dad, who was 6-foot-7. My father, whose name I share, was a retired Metropolitan Transportation Authority employee who had spent much of his time there doing trackwork and swore that he had the answers to fixing the beleaguered subway system. (The transit authority has suffered its own losses, with more than 50 MTA workers killed by the virus.)

Sometimes he griped about the hospital food – it was too cold, he said, or they were served chicken for dinner, again.

But in his last week, he looked increasingly tired. He was out of breath and had lost his booming voice.

Hours before he died, I called him on his cellphone, but he did not answer. Minutes later, he called me back, and I was overjoyed to see his face.

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