

School closing clip 3:

(music introduction)

Monika Samtani: We now enter week 14 of the flu pandemic and the numbers of sick and dead are staggering. Our nation mourns the loss of 96,000 lives as we struggle to care for nearly 5 million sick. Experts predict the number of Americans who die may ultimately reach 2 million. Globally, over 500 million have become ill and more than 21 million have died. This pandemic is testing our national character, and it's had a profound impact on every American community. Good Evening, I'm Monika Samtani for ANS, and I'm joined by our Homeland Security correspondent John Badila to talk about the pandemic's cascading effect on our nation and its critical infrastructure. John, you've just returned from Washington after traveling to some of the hardest hit areas with the president and Secretary of Homeland Security.

John Badila: That's right, I must tell you I've never had such widespread and devastating impact. This pandemic seems to have touched every facet of American life despite the best efforts of countless thousands struggling to minimize the pandemic's social and economic impact the situation continues to deteriorate.

Monika Samtani: In what ways?

John Badila: Well, the most immediate impact of the pandemic was the surge in demand for medical services: hospitals, clinics and doctors' offices were quickly overwhelmed these facilities were forced to sharply cut back on the care they would otherwise offer for non-acute health problems. The secondary impact here is on those who provide care. With increased exposure to the disease many caregivers became sick. Others have been forced to stay home to care for sick loved ones. And still others are so afraid of catching the flu they have not reported to work. This places an even greater strain on the health care system's ability to cope.

Monika Samtani: What about the effect on our economy?

John Badila: Well that too has been devastating. The pandemic has created a domino effect throughout the economy. Fear and government restrictions have combined to dramatically decrease travel. Attendance at sporting events, at restaurants and tourist attractions has declined. In addition, retail trade has been severely hurt as people avoided public places like shopping malls. Absenteeism due to fear or sickness is up in every sector. Supply chains have been strained due to disruptions in transportation systems. Shortages of food, medicines and other staples have become commonplace. Many schools have closed and those that remain open have seen attendance drop as worried parents keep their children home. As influenza continues, spread governments are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain critical infrastructure and provide essential goods and services. Even the federal government is facing staffing shortages due to absenteeism. And that's making it difficult for the feds to respond to requests for assistance.

Monika Samtani: Is this why cities across the country appear to be essentially closing down?

John Badila: Partially. But often decisions to close schools, place nonessential employees on leave or secure transit systems have been made in an effort to slow disease transmission, or to relieve pressure on overburdened systems.

Monika Samtani: We've heard reports of domestic unrest in some parts of this country. How are this being handled?

I'm aware of several states requesting federal assistance to maintain order and insure that critical infrastructure continues to operate, that essential goods can reach their destination, and that required services are maintained. But active duty, reserve and National Guard units are also experiencing personal shortages which are straining their ability to respond.

Monika Samtani: Now a larger issue may be a loss of confidence in government. As the situation worsens our people beginning to feel that the government has failed them, that it wasn't prepared to meet this threat.

John Badila: Many are expressing that feeling. I don't think it was a failure of government but rather a problem of requirements exceeding available resources. As a Wall Street Journal article pointed out, we have a conflict here. We're guided by concepts that promote important preparation like stockpiling critical resources, government intervention and overall preparedness. But these are costly, and they're at odds with US business practices that aim to cut costs and increase quality by reducing inventory and delivering raw materials and other products only as they're needed.

Monika Samtani: We've heard that the first delivery of pandemic vaccine is close at hand. Government officials are making difficult decisions about who will get vaccine first and who will follow. Obviously, everyone wants vaccine. Do you think we'll be seeing any public outcry over these plans?

John Badila: Well there going to be a lot more public debate on that subject. If officials don't make a compelling argument why those decisions are in all of our best interests, that could erode public confidence and raise issues of fairness. We'll have to follow that closely.

Monika Samtani: he OK, thank you John. As we've examined the pandemics effect on our economy, we've been reporting expectations of a 3 to 5% decline in the gross domestic product. When we come back we'll hear what the White House is doing to mitigate the long-term impact. Stay with us.

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