

The deaths of coronavirus victims are an ominous statistic that people watch anxiously. Many of those victims have left behind spouses, children, or grandchildren who were dependent on them. While we are spending trillions to help businesses impacted by the coronavirus, so far we are doing nothing for surviving families. We need to start seriously thinking about how to remedy this.

The U.S. record in the face of other disasters has been mixed. Congress created a generous fund for 9/11 families, but nothing for the families of those who died in Hurricane Katrina. Although the devastation of Hurricane Katrina was unique, the risk of harm in a hurricane was at least a familiar one on the Gulf Coast. The 9/11 attack, however, came completely out of nowhere, in terms of what ordinary Americans could expect. In those terms, the coronavirus outbreak seems closer to 9/11. The coronavirus and 9/11 were both unprecedented within most people's lifetimes. Before 9/11, the last time U.S. soil was attacked was 1941; the last devastating pandemic was in 1918.

These extraordinary catastrophic events require us to think about providing compensation for the most directly harmed, in particular the families of those killed. In the case of the coronavirus, I believe compensation is clearly warranted.

Justifications

There are two special arguments in favor of compensation for coronavirus victims. The first argument, based on simple fairness, is that coronavirus victims should be treated the same as many who are already being helped. The second is the extent to which failures by the federal government contributed to the severity of the outbreak.

Equity.

The equity argument is both simple and powerful. We are already spending immense sums of money to help support businesses and people who have lost their jobs due to the coronavirus. The goal is to help them manage during the crisis, pump money into a plummeting economy, and assist in rebuilding ordinary life afterwards. The surviving families of coronavirus victims surely qualify as much on all these grounds as businesses or the unemployed.

Government responsibility.

The second argument is that the federal government bears responsibility for some of the harm caused by the pandemic. Even though the government had ample notice of the

seriousness of the threat, the White House continued to insist that the risks were minimal. It held back responses that agencies might otherwise have made, and even limited the ability of agencies to provide information to the public. The White House delayed declaring a national emergency and forced states to compete with each other for PPE.

Conservatives may be prepared to justify or overlook these White House actions. They should be at least willing to acknowledge a series of missteps by the bureaucracy: the botched coronavirus tests, the delay in acknowledging their tests were faulty, and the refusal to allow alternative tests to be used in the meantime.

Regardless of your political perspective, the bottom line is that the government not only failed to respond appropriately but took steps that made it harder for others to respond. That seems to place a special responsibility on the federal government to help victims.

Moving Forward

I find the argument based on government responsibility compelling, but I recognize that it may be politically problematic to play something that may look like the “blame game.” The first argument, based on equity with others suffering from the effects of the outbreak, seems unanswerable to me.

Planning a suitable compensation scheme presents practical problems. There are several models that we could build on. Possible models include: (1) [Social Security benefits](#) for surviving spouses and dependent children; (2) the [9/11 compensation fund](#); and (3) the [fund](#) for compensation of victims of black lung disease.

The details need to be worked out. But people are suffering today. We need to get to work now on addressing their needs.