

# DAILY BEAST

## Lawmakers Know They Can't Keep Track of the \$2.2T They Just Spent on Virus Relief

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Like nearly every member of Congress, Rep. Katie Porter (D-CA) was glad to see Washington approve nearly \$3 trillion over the last month in hopes of helping those hardest hit by the coronavirus outbreak.

But since that historic sum of taxpayer money was rushed out Capitol Hill's doors, Porter has watched with dread as Congress' responsibility to track where exactly those dollars went—and who they went to—has grown seemingly more daunting by the day.

That's largely because a month after the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act was signed into law, the key entities lawmakers created to oversee the massive federal response to the virus haven't even started their work yet. While they lay dormant, reporting has revealed inefficiencies and waste in the programs, like big, publicly traded companies elbowing out small shops for billions in critical relief dollars.

Porter, a member of the House Oversight Committee who herself oversaw a landmark \$9.5 billion mortgage settlement for Californians after the financial meltdown, has a motto when it comes to good government oversight: It should be “breaking news, not the History Channel.” In other words, its job isn't just to figure out what went wrong, but actually make existing programs work better.

Time is running out to accomplish that critical goal, says Porter, with the window for real-time accountability vanishing as quickly as federal relief funds. A troubling example, she told The Daily Beast in an interview on Saturday, is a five-member congressional commission to oversee the CARES Act money that still lacks a chair, who has to be agreed upon by Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY). It took weeks for congressional leaders to name their own nominees for the panel.

“They should have been prepared to make those appointments within 24 to 48 hours,” said Porter. “It’s definitely hampered the ability for oversight to be effective. We have definitely wasted, misused taxpayer money because of that delay.”

“It isn’t clear at this point,” she said, “we’re making use of any of the different tools to do effective oversight.”

All involved with the oversight effort agree there’s a daunting task at hand: shedding some sunlight on an extraordinary flurry of spending and government activity, all while trying to develop the next round of response to the damage caused by the disease—and remotely, to boot. Factor in the Trump administration’s typically dismissive, even hostile, attitude toward oversight and, to many, the outlook gets even more discouraging.

“We’re not on hold,” insisted Rep. Gerry Connolly (D-VA), a senior member of the House Oversight Committee. But he told The Daily Beast in an interview that he, too, was concerned about the rapidly-expanding scope and scale of COVID-related oversight duties, and Congress’ ability to meet them.

“It’s just that circumstances make it very difficult,” said Connolly. “We continue to do what we can. It will require, I think, the resumption of some kind of normal routine for us to go full bore.”

Most anticipate that oversight of the federal virus relief programs will continue years after the worst of the crisis has passed. In addition to lawmakers like Porter, outside oversight watchdogs

are anxious for Congress to find a way to ramp up its oversight right now, before things go back to normal.

“A month is not a long period of time in the grand scheme of things, but when we’re talking about the speed with which we’re spending this money, a month is an incredibly long period of time,” said Liz Hempowicz, director of public policy at the Project on Government Oversight, a nonpartisan group that works with Congress to implement good-government best practices.

“We should be putting a lot of pressure on leadership in both the House and Senate to get their shit together and figure out how they’re going to be operating.”

Last month, policymakers attempted to create an overlapping web of powerful panels and independent watchdogs with multi-million dollar budgets and expansive powers to sniff out mismanagement, abuse, inefficiency, and inequity across the federal government’s response.

The CARES Act, which passed on March 27, set up several of these entities. It established the five-member congressional commission—closely modeled after the panel that oversaw the \$800 billion Troubled Asset Relief Program created in the 2008 financial crisis—that will focus on overseeing the Treasury Department and the Federal Reserve’s stewardship of the hundred-billion dollar programs to provide relief for the economy.

The law also set up the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee, a panel made up of inspectors general from various federal agencies with a similar set of duties—detecting waste, fraud, abuse, and other inefficiencies in all past and present COVID-19 relief measures. Glenn Fine, the acting inspector general of the Pentagon, was named as the chief of this panel but was swiftly removed by President Trump. There is no permanent chair yet.

The CARES Act also created a special inspector general for pandemic response, focused on scrutinizing the Treasury Department's administration of relief funds. Trump's nominee for the position, longtime inspector general Brian Miller, has yet to be confirmed by the Senate.

With those watchdog organizations slow to start, Democrats and outside oversight advocates had been encouraged by Pelosi's move to create a special subcommittee within the House Oversight Committee to focus on the coronavirus, which she announced shortly after the passage of the CARES Act. The panel, as Pelosi explained it, would have a broader mandate than other oversight entities—enabling it to move quicker and in more directions than the five-member, bicameral commission set up by the stimulus bill.

But even that panel has yet to begin its work, as it was only officially authorized in a House vote last week. And some aides and lawmakers still aren't sure what exactly the committee is supposed to do, much less when it's supposed to start doing it. It was established with a laundry list of tasks—like rooting out waste, fraud, and abuse in management of federal programs, along with other items like inequities in the impact of the coronavirus and the administration's response. One of its mandates is overseeing the broader oversight effort itself.

“I think there's a need to sharpen the mission of the select commission and to have an understanding of what its reportables and deliverables are,” said Porter. “I will tell you, it's possible to have a task force that has neither any task or any force.”

Nearly all involved in oversight work, however, believe you can't have too much of it: overlapping mandates and seemingly redundant structures, they say, is not a sign of inefficiency but a failsafe to ensure that failure or mismanagement in one board or office doesn't doom the entire project.

“You've really got to have as many folks as possible, with as many eyeballs on information as possible, to make sure taxpayer dollars are going to places where they're going to do the most

good,” said Justin Rood, director of the congressional oversight initiative at POGO. “Any disaster, any crisis, brings fraudsters and shysters out of the woodwork.”

Then there’s Trump’s willingness to fire watchdogs he sees as hostile or out of his grasp, putting more pressure on lawmakers to conduct aggressive oversight, some say.

“We have a president who has made clear he’s willing to, and will, dismiss these kinds of watchdogs from their positions and eliminate this kind of oversight that’s within the executive branch,” said Porter. “It’s particularly important for the congressional branch to be doing its work.”

Amid those challenges, William Yeatman, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute who is tracking congressional oversight of coronavirus, had one word for the outlook of that project: bleak.

“Let me put it this way: ‘getting around to it’ isn’t good enough,” he told The Daily Beast.

“That’s good enough, perhaps, in the normal order of things. In this instance, I don’t think that’s good enough.”