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Senate Finance Committee
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Good morning, Chairman Leatherman, President Peeler, committee members, and staff. I am pleased to be here with you today to provide you with an overview of our ongoing public health response efforts.

As an update, DHEC is now reporting a total of 33 cases of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus in counties across our state. This includes: (3) Beaufort, (1) Charleston, (17) Kershaw, (2) Lancaster, (1) Fairfield, (2) Lexington, (1) Spartanburg, (2) Anderson, (1) Greenville, and (3) Horry.

Sadly, this includes our state's first reported death of a patient who had recently been reported to have been diagnosed with COVID-19. The patient was an elderly person from Lexington County and was a resident of Lexington Medical Center Extended Care Skilled Nursing Facility.

The patient had underlying health issues prior to testing positive for COVID-19. Because of these underlying medical conditions, we do not know the exact cause of death. We are continuing to work with the facility to identify all contacts and are providing guidance about infection control measures to prevent possible spread.

While we have been expecting a day in which we would have to make this announcement, it is never easy to have to report on the death of a fellow member of our community. On behalf of all South Carolinians, we want to express our deepest sympathy for the family and loved ones of this patient. This loss is a reminder of the importance of taking precautions to protect those at higher risk, like the elderly and people with serious underlying health conditions, from exposure to illnesses.

As South Carolina's lead public health authority, our top priorities remain preventing the spread of the disease and protecting the public's health. As of late yesterday, DHEC's Public Health Laboratory has conducted 340 tests – 29 positives and 311 negatives.

We know that many South Carolinians are concerned about what impact this virus may have on themselves, their loved ones, and our state. While we are not currently seeing widespread transmission in South Carolina, we want people to be prepared and to remain calm and measured as more cases occur. Recognize that the majority of illnesses are relatively mild – the type of illness for which you might not normally even seek medical care.

Based on what we know so far, the CDC expects that many people in the United States will at some point in time, either this year or next, be exposed to this virus. This will include residents here at home – in South Carolina. However, it's important to note that most people will likely not develop serious illness.

While this is occurring as we expected it to, we still must continue to take measures to help safeguard against illness, including practicing good hygiene, including routinely washing your hands and covering your mouth when you cough. Individuals with signs of illness are asked to take seriously the recommendation to stay home from school and work and not attend public gatherings.

We do not recommend that everyone who is ill get a test to see if they have COVID-19. If disease activity increases significantly, we will advise people to stay home, get better and seek medical care if symptoms are worsening. This will allow our healthcare systems and our health care providers to give care to those who need it most.

This will likely be an extended response. Please know that our public health professionals are constantly monitoring our epidemiological data and following CDC guidance and recommendation for strategies to slow the spread of disease in our communities. As cases increase, we are prioritizing identifying close contacts who are at high-risk of illness from exposure and who are more likely to have serious illness. This includes our nursing homes and assisted living facilities, as well as other vulnerable populations with unique circumstances.

We, like other states, are also beginning to practice social distancing for communities as a whole.

The number of cases that ultimately occur will depend in part on all of our efforts to practice good personal hygiene like hand washing and protecting others by staying home when ill. We continue to work with federal, state, and local partners to prepare and respond to this situation to best protect the health of the residents of South Carolina and our public health professionals have been working around the clock to diligently investigate reported cases, follow-up with the contacts of known cases, and educate the public on the steps they can take to help protect the safety and health of our state.

We are still learning about this virus and we are committed to keeping the public informed. As we learn more, we will continue to provide updates as quickly and as timely as possible. For the latest information, I encourage you to visit our website at scdhec.gov/covid19.