Local officials from around the country are worried about the readiness of the U.S. public health system, citing a sharply limited number of ventilators to help some of the sickest coronavirus patients and an inadequate supply of critical care beds in a hospital industry that has gone through years of cutbacks in inpatient beds.

As they prepare for an expected influx of patients, local public health officials painted a picture of a system with only a limited "surge" capacity, and stressed the importance of social distancing as a crucial way to keep the numbers of patients at a level the system can handle.

"It's about our supply of ventilators, our supply of beds, and of course we have to worry about our health care workers and the general stress on our health care system," said Dr. Amy Acton, the head of the Ohio Department of Health. "If we stay below a certain threshold, we can try not to overwhelm our health care system. So we need to take aggressive measures now."