

AFL-CIO

LEGISLATIVE ALERT

March 17, 2020

Dear Senator:

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the labor movement is mobilizing to protect front line workers who are combating the disease every day and millions more workers who may be exposed to the virus. We urge the Senate to pass the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (H.R. 6201) as soon as possible. While this package is not a complete response to the crisis, it is an urgent measure that will get necessary assistance to working people facing serious health and financial risks.

H.R. 6201 will encourage working people to seek testing for infection by making the tests free for most people covered by employment-based insurance, Medicare, or Medicaid. We believe this is a crucial step to contain the spread of the virus. Subsequent legislation should focus on ensuring that out-of-pocket costs are waived for screening visits, outpatient treatment, hospitalization, and treatment in other inpatient settings. In addition, the 6.2 percentage point increase to the Medicaid federal medical assistance percentage (FMAP) should be increased to 10 points, to help states handle increased medical costs and provide stimulus to the economy.

Recognizing that the United States lacks adequate paid sick days or paid leave to make it possible for workers to stay home when they need to, and protect them from financial hardship, the bill mandates that workers who are sick or affected by quarantine orders receive up to 14 paid sick days and up to 12 weeks of paid leave per year. Unfortunately, hundreds of thousands of workers will not be eligible because the White House insisted on exempting large employers from this requirement. In addition, health care workers and first responders are left unprotected. We urge Congress to broaden these provisions to protect all workers when it considers subsequent legislation to address the COVID-19 pandemic.

H.R. 6201 also takes steps to improve access to food by expanding the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Women, Infant and Children (WIC) program and the school lunch program. Recognizing that the current federal unemployment insurance (UI) program will not provide sufficient support for states to meet the needs of workers, the package provides additional funding for states.

As originally introduced, H.R. 6201 included a requirement that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) issue an Emergency Temporary Standard to ensure that health care facilities implement comprehensive infectious disease exposure control plans to keep front line health care workers safe. Displaying an appalling disregard for the safety and health of front line health care workers, the Trump administration demanded that the House drop this provision. We urge both the House and Senate to make sure this provision covers all workers, in public and private health care facilities, and that it be included on a priority basis in future legislation. As the epidemic already is spreading and intensifying, OSHA soon will be overwhelmed with complaints and requests for assistance and additional compliance safety and health officers (CSHOs) also are urgently needed.

Finally, because the COVID-19 pandemic poses a significant risk to the economy, we need to develop and implement plans on a large scale to mitigate, if not prevent, an increasingly likely economic slowdown. However, to this end, we oppose a payroll tax cut because there are other more targeted and fairer proposals that would provide greater economic stimulus--for example, cutting the payroll tax would be of no benefit to laid-off workers. Further, a payroll tax cut, as contemplated, would undermine Social Security, our nation's most important and effective family income support program. Since the virus does not discriminate in terms of who it touches, it is critical that our overall response be as inclusive as possible, helping everyone who may be affected, regardless of their immigration status.

H.R 6021 takes a critical first step, but bolder action is needed to protect the health, economic security and well-being of the American people. We urge you to act without delay.

Sincerely,



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Director, Government Affairs

American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations

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