

AFL-CIO

LEGISLATIVE ALERT

March 2, 2020

Chairman Richard Shelby
Ranking Member Patrick Leahy
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Shelby and Ranking Member Leahy:

On behalf of the AFL-CIO, I urge you to advance an emergency supplemental appropriations package that will support the first phases of a national response to the public health emergency presented by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) epidemic. This response must ensure that frontline workers performing essential services are protected against exposures to the virus—in order to protect these individuals and the public.

We support a funding level of \$8 billion as an initial amount to support the efforts of public health agencies to respond to the outbreak and to help health care workers and first responders safely care for individuals who contract COVID-19. This funding will also help public-facing workers stay safe as they provide essential services in areas such as transportation, education, corrections, and food preparation.

The administration's initial proposal of \$2.5 billion was grossly inadequate, as recent U.S. experiences with infectious disease emergencies show. In 2009, Congress appropriated \$7.7 billion in funding to address the H1N1 influenza pandemic. Similarly, \$5.4 billion was appropriated in 2014 for the Ebola response. This funding supported expanded surveillance by public health agencies; the distribution of personal protective equipment and anti-viral drugs; increasing federal stockpiles of drugs and medical supplies; developing, buying, and administering vaccines; and other critical needs.

This level of response is the minimum required for the present disease outbreak. We are pleased that you are moving this package expeditiously. In the weeks ahead, we can expect the domestic spread of this virus may be similar to the rapid spread of infection experienced in other countries. An urgent response could save thousands of lives.

Ensuring worker safety is a key element of effective response. Health care workers are on the front lines of the response to COVID-19, putting them at serious risk of infection. Already there have been reports that several healthcare workers in Washington State and California have contracted COVID-19, and dozens of health care workers have been exposed. Protecting healthcare workers from infection is critical not only to preserve the health of the workforce, but also to limit the spread of the virus.

Worker safety agencies are part of the public health infrastructure that must be supported in response to epidemics. Funding for the federal agencies that protect worker safety must be bolstered, including support for the following activities:

- Worker training in response, preparedness, protections, and personal protective equipment donning and doffing—provided by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS).
- Issuing an OSHA emergency temporary standard to protect workers from infectious disease exposures.
- Enhancing OSHA enforcement capacity to ensure employers are using preparedness plans, providing adequate worker protections, and conducting safety training for workers.

Although we support the level of funding provided by this expedited legislation, we believe further action and additional funding is necessary. This crisis exposes shortcomings of our public health system and our system of worker protections. Workers should not incur additional costs when they do the right thing to keep themselves and their families safe and protect public health—take time off from work when they are sick, get tested for COVID-19, seek medical treatment for the virus, or when they are placed in isolation or follow quarantine requirements. It is important – from the perspective of both public health and fairness – that cost considerations not deter workers from doing what they are supposed to be doing to protect themselves and the public.

Thank you for moving this emergency supplemental package quickly. We look forward to working with you to ensure the nation mounts a full and effective response to the COVID-19 health emergency and that health care workers and other workers on the front lines of the response are adequately protected.

Sincerely,



William Samuel
Director, Government Affairs

CC: Senator Lamar Alexander, Chairman, Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
Senator Patty Murray, Ranking Member, Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations

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