



Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development
Office of Domestic Social Development

COVID-19 Relief that Meets the Needs of the Poor & Vulnerable
January 2021

“The pandemic has highlighted how vulnerable and interconnected everyone is. If we do not take care of one another, starting with the least, with those who are most impacted, including creation, we cannot heal the world.”

– Pope Francis, Catechesis “Healing the World”: Faith and Human Dignity, August 12, 2020

BACKGROUND:

The COVID-19 pandemic’s historic health and economic crises have created great needs in our communities. We are called to respond in a way that prioritizes those who are poor and vulnerable. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has consistently advocated for Congress to address peoples’ need for food, housing, health care, employment and income support, and safety in prisons and detention facilities. Relief legislation passed by Congress in 2020 has been a lifeline for families and individuals struggling to make ends meet. Still, more is needed to reach all sectors of society and ensure that help lasts for the duration of the economic crisis.

Hunger and Nutrition

An increasing number of households do not have enough to eat. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a proven way to combat this food insecurity, delivering resources directly to low-income households and quickly responding to surges in demand for assistance. Recent increases in SNAP benefit amounts will be a great help and should be maintained until the economy recovers. The same is true for flexibilities provided to SNAP and other nutrition programs, so they can best respond to local needs while respecting health guidelines. Continued investments in vital nutrition programs such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) will also help respond to food insecurity that has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Housing Assistance

Over half a million Americans experienced homelessness on a given night before the coronavirus pandemic. Millions more are at risk of losing their homes due to the resulting economic crisis. Ensuring stable housing is essential, especially during a public health crisis. Those experiencing homelessness are particularly vulnerable to contracting the coronavirus, are more likely to need acute care if they become infected, and have less opportunity to socially distance in order to keep themselves and others safe. Robust investments in Emergency Solutions Grants, emergency rental assistance, housing counseling services, and mortgage payment assistance as well as greater eviction and foreclosure preventions will help address the health and housing needs of America’s lowest-income renters and people experiencing homelessness.

Health Care

Millions of people have lost their health insurance coverage during the pandemic. Individuals who do not have access to employer sponsored insurance, do not qualify for Medicaid, and cannot afford private insurance for their families have a need for affordable healthcare coverage. Necessary efforts to provide such coverage should ensure no federal funding goes to health care plans that cover abortion. Expanding Medicaid resources for states and tribes is an important tool to respond to public health needs while avoiding cuts to healthcare or other vital services. There is a need to address racial inequities in healthcare, which existed in many forms before the COVID-19 crisis and have manifested in disturbingly disproportionate rates of coronavirus infection and death in patients of color. This reality demands a strong federal response to provide more healthcare resources and outreach in communities of color. Additional resources to Community Health Centers and other methods of care for low-income and historically marginalized communities are examples of the

type of investments needed. As is even more clear in a pandemic, the exclusion of some from health care threatens the health of all.

Employment and Income Support

Millions of people are unemployed or suffering lost wages as a result of the pandemic. Continued resources should be available to keep people employed safely, and to assist the unemployed and those struggling to pay bills. Essential workers who are providing critical services to society, often for low pay and at risk to their health, should have access to sufficient resources, particularly personal protective equipment (PPE), to safeguard their health and wellbeing. Additional funding for the Paycheck Protection Program will help people keep their jobs and incentivize employers to hire back workers who have been laid off. Unemployment compensation must remain robust while job opportunities in some sectors suffer longer term reductions. Additional stimulus payments while employment opportunities are reduced would counter deepening economic insecurity for many families. Both the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit are powerful anti-poverty tools, but they exclude too many people in need. These programs can be strengthened and improved by expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit to include childless workers and making the Child Tax Credit fully refundable, making them better able to reduce and overcome poverty.

Safety in Prisons, Jails and Detention Centers

COVID-19 poses a serious threat to those in prisons, jails, and detention centers, which were not designed for social distancing. Congress must act to protect those in these facilities, where the virus is spreading much faster than among the general population. In light of the pandemic, there should be greater consideration for appropriate compassionate release for vulnerable people who are incarcerated and certain fees related to the criminal justice system should be waived, such as fees for phone and video calls. Facilities must be given sufficient healthcare resources to offer good care to those who become ill. States will need additional resources and incentives to implement these policies.

USCCB POSITION:

The U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops strongly supports continued bipartisan efforts to help the millions who have lost health insurance; ensure the safety of persons in prisons, jails, and detention centers; provide additional state and local funding; and prevent relief from expiring or funding from running out while it is still needed. New COVID-19 relief legislation is necessary and must serve the common good and support the wellbeing of those on the margins of our society.

RESOURCES:

The following represent additional USCCB advocacy for COVID-19 Relief:

[Statement Encouraging Lawmakers to Provide Aid to Those Affected by Coronavirus](#) (March 12, 2020)

[Statement Praising Lawmakers for Historic Emergency Legislation on Coronavirus Relief](#) (March 28, 2020)

[Letter to Senate and House Committees on Appropriations](#) (April 9, 2020)

[Letter to Senate and House Committees on the Judiciary](#) (April 9, 2020)

[Letter to Senate Comm. on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions; House Comm. on Education & Labor](#) (April 9, 2020)

[Letter to Senate Committee on Finance; House Committees on Ways & Means; Energy & Commerce](#) (April 9, 2020)

[Statement Urging Leaders to Examine Impact of COVID-19 on African American Communities](#) (May 4, 2020)

[Letter to All Members of Congress on Moral Framework for Health Care](#) (May 7, 2020)

[Statement Expressing Solidarity with Native and Indigenous Communities](#) (May 13, 2020)

[Statement Urging Care for the Poor and Vulnerable in Consideration of COVID-19 Relief](#) (May 22, 2020)

[Letter to All Members of Congress Summarizing All COVID-Related Needs](#) (July 30, 2020)

[Letter to Senate and House leadership on Catholic Education](#) (August 5, 2020)

[Statement on Need for Lawmakers to Reach a Deal and Respond to the Cry of the Poor](#) (September 8, 2020)

[Letter to President and Congressional Leadership on Additional Relief](#) (September 25, 2020)

[Statement Calling for Reconsideration of End of COVID-Relief Discussions](#) (October 7, 2020)

[Statement Commending Urgently Needed Bipartisan COVID Relief Package](#) (December 28, 2020)

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