



UNIVERSAL HEALTH CARE
FOUNDATION OF CONNECTICUT

May 26, 2020

Below is the text of a letter sent to U.S. Senators Christopher Murphy and Richard Blumenthal.

On behalf of Universal Health Care Foundation of Connecticut, I write today to emphasize the urgent need for the Senate to pass the next COVID-19 relief package and to highlight several policies that we strongly believe should be included in the legislation.

First, we want to thank you for voting in favor of the previous Coronavirus relief packages, including the Families First Coronavirus Support Act and the CARES Act. But as Connecticut endeavors to find the right balance for keeping people safe while slowly increasing economic activity, it is clear that much more federal assistance will be needed.

As you know, the people of Connecticut have been hit hard by COVID-19. Over 40,000 residents have tested positive, with many other cases going unreported, and over 3,700 people have died. Over half a million people have applied for unemployment assistance and many parts of the state's economy have been shut down in order to slow down the spread of the virus.

We urge the Senate to address this unprecedented calamity by passing legislation that matches the scope and scale of the HEROES Act recently approved by the House of Representatives.

An overarching need is to provide support directly to states, cities and towns to maintain jobs and crucial programs and services. The Senate should match or exceed the funding allocated in the HEROES Act: \$500 billion to states and \$375 billion to localities.

With regard to specific policy areas, our comments in this letter focus on access to health care and coverage, building public health infrastructure and safe voting. All of our comments are offered taking into consideration the fact that people of color have been disproportionately affected by the crisis, laying bare the huge racial and ethnic inequities in our state. Their needs, and the needs of immigrant families, regardless of status, must be addressed if our efforts to keep the residents of our state healthy and to restart our economy are to succeed.

Access to Health Care and Coverage

Private Insurance

The COVID-19 emergency has shown just how fragile our employer-based health insurance system is. With millions losing their jobs across the country, many are also losing their health coverage at a time when they need it the most. And those who still have their coverage face high deductibles and out of

pocket costs should they get sick. The HEROES Act primarily addresses this crisis by ensuring that patients will be protected from any out-of-pocket costs for COVID-19 treatment, mirroring the protections that are already in place for testing. It also proposes 100% subsidizing of COBRA premiums.

While these steps are important, we feel Congress could do much better. Many more people could be helped by enhancing the existing structure of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) by providing:

- Expanded ACA subsidies
- Protection from end of year repayments due to income changes

An even better approach would be to allow Medicaid/Medicare emergency enrollment for all who are uninsured, as laid out in the Senate's Health Care Emergency Guarantee Act (Sanders), or the House version, the Medicare Crisis Program Act (Jayapal).

Medicaid

With state budgets so challenged, Congress must do everything it can to help states maintain existing health programs, and expand them, when possible. The effort to make sure people can access the care they need, starts with enhanced support for the Medicaid program. We believe Senate legislation should incorporate several crucial provisions in the HEROES Act, including:

- Additional federal matching funds for Medicaid programs (Husky A and B). All states should be required to maintain their current programs, with no exceptions. The special provision in the HEROES Act to allow New York state an exemption should be removed. This is no time to cut health care programs for low income people.
- Ensuring emergency Medicaid coverage for COVID-19 treatment of low-income uninsured residents, regardless of immigration status
- Increased matching funds for Home and Community Based Services
- Coverage for incarcerated individuals beginning 30 days prior to release

Vaccines and Treatments

It is imperative that the federal government continue to fund COVID-19 treatment and vaccine research and manufacturing capacity and to allow no cost access to everyone. However, it is equally important to include legislative language that specifically addresses the overall affordability of vaccines and treatments. Prices for these therapeutics, largely funded with federal dollars, should be determined based on covering any additional private investment at cost, with no profiteering permitted. Transparency regarding these investments will be key, to ensure that prices are set at appropriate levels.

Support for Providers and Frontline Workers

Health care providers are at the center of the COVID-19 maelstrom. During the initial months of the pandemic, doctors, nurses, nursing assistants, dietary aides, and housekeeping staff have sacrificed everything, including their lives, to care for us. Other essential workers, such as those working in grocery stores or delivery warehouses have also put their lives at risk, often working under unsafe conditions. The Senate's bill should include:

- Enhanced provider relief fund, with provisions for ensuring Medicaid essential providers receive their fair share of funding, including dedicated support for community health centers and mental health and substance abuse prevention and treatment
- Hazard pay, sufficient supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) and a requirement that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) set standards to keep essential workers safe

Public Health

Failure to invest in our public health system left the United States much more vulnerable to COVID-19. Given the Trump Administration's continued inability to coordinate an effective response, states like Connecticut are doing their best to protect their residents while reviving the economy. But they need federal dollars to help them stand up the necessary public health infrastructure, as quickly as possible. We support substantial investment in a system of testing, contact tracing and isolation. That system must focus on vulnerable populations, including funding community health workers to become part of a trusted outreach workforce. It should support robust data collection by race and ethnicity and funding for a nursing home "strike force".

COVID-19 is showing us how central the social determinants of health are. The HEROES Act provides a major expansion of SNAP benefits and other essential food security support, as well as funding for housing, education and other critical areas. In addition to addressing these crucial needs, Senate legislation must include provisions for direct income support, as the House has done:

- Federal weekly \$600 unemployment payments through the end of year, and assistance for state unemployment systems to enable timely distribution of all unemployment benefits
- Another round of stimulus checks (\$1200 per person), including to immigrants with ITIN
- Improvements to paid sick leave
- Strengthening EITC provisions

Democracy

Finally, a top priority must be ensuring that everyone can vote safely this November. Connecticut's antiquated voting procedures need updating and that is going to cost money. Without an infusion of federal support, our very democracy is at stake. Ensuring an accurate census count during these difficult times is also imperative. We support these provisions in the HEROES Act and urge you to fight for their inclusion in the Senate bill:

- \$3.6 billion to ensure safe, secure voting that protects the health of voters and poll workers
- \$25 billion in funding to provide financial relief for the US Postal Service
- Additional funding for the census and allowing a four-month delay of reporting deadlines

While we understand the uphill battle faced in the Senate, we believe it is crucial for the federal government to provide the support that Connecticut residents so desperately need to survive the current emergency and lay the groundwork for economic recovery.

Sincerely,



Frances G. Padilla
President

cc: Governor Ned Lamont