

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 17, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Leader McCarthy:

As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads across the country, women and their families are particularly vulnerable to its devastating health and economic impacts. While previous stimulus packages have included critical measures such as unemployment protections, investments in public health, and relief to small businesses and the nonprofit sector, more must be done to ensure individuals struggling to make ends meet are not left behind. It is imperative that future COVID-19 packages center the needs of the people most affected by this unprecedented crisis and lay the groundwork to rebuild on a more solid foundation.

Provide Economic Security for Women and their Families

The COVID-19 pandemic is bringing to light the economic vulnerabilities that are familiar to families already struggling to make ends meet. COVID-19 is exacerbating the deep gaps in our child care and education infrastructure, our lack of paid family and sick leave for workers, and our inadequate unemployment benefits.

The significant gaps in child care and our education system have long existed due to consistent underinvestment in these sectors. While we applaud efforts to include \$3.5 billion in dedicated funding through the Child Care and Development Block Grant and \$30 billion for K-12 and higher education in the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act* (CARES Act), it is far from what is needed to keep our child care and education systems afloat. The fourth stimulus package must provide at least \$50 billion in funding for child care, \$75 billion in robust funding for state stabilization funds for K-12, and \$50 billion for higher education budgets.

Furthermore, this pandemic has made clear the need for paid sick time and emergency paid family and medical leave to support all families, but especially women who have a disproportionate share of caregiving responsibilities and are more likely to need paid time off. The *Families First Coronavirus Response Act* (FFCRA) created emergency paid sick days and paid family leave protections, but these were limited to workers at businesses with fewer than 500 employees, ultimately leaving huge swaths of the workforce who cannot access the law's paid leave entitlements, including those currently providing essential frontline services. Additionally, undocumented workers are not protected, health care providers and emergency responders can be exempted, and businesses with fewer than 50 workers can seek an exemption from providing paid sick days or paid family leave to care for a child whose school or place of care is closed. The U.S. Department of Labor has issued overly broad regulations that make it even more challenging for workers to access paid leave. All workers, regardless of where they work, must be able to meet their health and family needs without jeopardizing their economic security.

Although the CARES Act provided significant temporary investments in federal and state unemployment insurance systems, we must continue to improve unemployment protections. Unemployment Insurance is an essential tool for the long-term economic stability of women and families during this pandemic. Employees in the service industry and other lower wage industries are facing devastating lay-offs during this crisis. Women – and disproportionately women of color - are the majority of workers in these industries. Federal Unemployment Insurance benefits must be extended and states must be incentivized to ease burdensome requirements, increase benefits, and lengthen the number of weeks of eligibility.

The health and safety of workers on the front line of the pandemic response, many of whom are women, must be prioritized. Front line workers such as nurses, grocery store workers, farmworkers, home care and child care workers, shelter and crisis services providers, and delivery service workers need appropriate personal protective equipment, protective occupational safety and health standards, and premium pay.

Moreover, in the face of massive job loss and economic displacement, workers are even more desperate to keep their jobs, which makes them more vulnerable to workplace exploitation and retaliation, and less willing to challenge discrimination and abusive working conditions. Our worker protection laws must be robustly enforced and strengthened to allow workers to stay healthy and economically secure during this time.

Erase Educational Inequity

The fourth stimulus package must also protect the educational needs of historically disenfranchised students. To protect the civil rights of all students, forthcoming stimulus packages should prohibit the Secretary of Education from finalizing any proposed non-emergency rules, such as the Title IX rule, until after the national emergency has ended and schools have resumed their regular operations. To help bridge the digital divide, the fourth stimulus package should also increase funding for the Lifeline program and expand the FCC's E-rate program to fund home internet to reduce access inequities inherent in distance learning for low-income students, Native American students, and Black and Latinx students.

Safety from Violence During this Pandemic

Women who are homeless, LGBTQ, immigrants, elderly, or have a disability struggle more in a crisis. Research also demonstrates that public crises significantly increase the rate of domestic and sexual violence. Survivors who lose their jobs are forced to either return to abusive relationships or seek victim services and housing assistance that they previously did not need. Survivors may also find more urgency in leaving abusive relationships and seek assistance if they are quarantined with an abuser. We applaud bipartisan efforts to secure \$45 million for the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA) and \$2 million for the National Domestic Violence Hotline. However, we are concerned that this funding for domestic violence programs is insufficient, and that no funding has been provided to address the needs of sexual assault survivors. We must continue to prioritize strong funding levels for Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and FVPSA programs in future packages. In addition to robust funding, we must ensure that survivors of domestic and sexual violence have access to unemployment insurance if they leave a job due to the violence, have access to paid safe leave to take time off to seek medical attention, victim services or attend to legal matters, and ensure that survivors, who may be living in shelters or undisclosed locations, living with an abusive partner, or separated from abusive partners but filed taxes jointly, are able to access their rebates. Without providing full support to all programs for sexual and domestic violence programs, we needlessly risk the safety and lives of survivors.

Lifting up Women and Minority-Owned Small Businesses

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all parts of our society--especially our nation's small businesses--which have been hit hard by mandatory closures and safety measures enacted to slow the spread. Women-owned businesses — whose operations run with fewer resources and less access to capital through traditional banks — are already at a disadvantage. The CARES Act created the Paycheck Protection Program to provide zero-fee forgivable loans to

small businesses that keep their employees on the payroll for eight weeks. Unfortunately, this program has not been working as intended given that banks are serving existing clients first and unlikely to reach millions of the smallest businesses in need, a disproportionate share of which are women and minority owned businesses. Therefore, any future proposals must include funding that would be provided to community development financial institutions and minority depository institutions which are in the best position to get these funds quickly to underserved borrowers.

Access to Health Care and Reproductive Freedom

The need to access essential health care will increase, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Chronic disease management for conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and asthma; as well as access to preventative services and reproductive health care, including abortion, are critical and should not be prohibited or deemed non-essential. Yet the lack of coverage, cost of care, and restrictions on abortion make it harder for those already facing barriers to getting the care they need. Therefore, any future proposals addressing the COVID-19 crisis should include a special open enrollment period for the federal marketplace so that individuals have access to comprehensive health care; provide funding to guarantee no cost-sharing for treatment related to COVID-19; expand access to essential health care by requiring comprehensive coverage and funding for the care; and ensure that the communities with the starkest disparities in COVID-19 mortality have targeted testing, treatment and vaccinations. Additional federal efforts must address maternal health needs to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on pregnant and breastfeeding women. This will help to advise on the unique risks and precautions to ensure safe and healthy outcomes for pregnancies. Finally, funding efforts must also include the health needs of immigrants, undocumented individuals, incarcerated individuals, and individuals who are in the asylum system or detained through the immigration system. Agencies should institute policies that allow for proper social distancing and incentivize family stability. Tribes and tribal communities are also in desperate need of resources and the Indian Health Services needs robust funding to meet those needs.

Protecting and Strengthening Social Safety Nets

Women are more likely to be economically insecure than men at every stage of life, with women of color experiencing larger income and wealth disparities. Women and their families need in-kind support to mitigate widespread economic hardship and stabilize the economy. A forthcoming stimulus package must incorporate these priorities by boosting the maximum SNAP benefit by 15 percent; increasing the monthly minimum SNAP benefit from \$16 to \$30; and placing a hold on harmful rules proposed by the Executive Branch that weaken SNAP eligibility and benefits. Investments in the SNAP program as well as other public benefits programs like housing and homelessness assistance, will be key to ensuring women and their families, who are particularly vulnerable to the devastating health and economic impacts of this pandemic, are not left behind. Increasing benefit amounts for Social Security and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) beneficiaries, expanding refundable tax credits like the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC), and providing additional direct payments will also target much-needed resources to women and families.

Thank you for your leadership during this unprecedented public health emergency and the growing economic uncertainty we face ahead. As further stimulus packages are crafted to address COVID-19, adhering to these principles will be critical for the long-term health of women and their families.

Sincerely,

Brenda L. Lawrence
Member of Congress

Lois Frankel
Member of Congress

Jackie Speier
Member of Congress

Veronica Escobar
Member of Congress

Deb Haaland
Member of Congress