

Dear Senator/Representative:

As organizations representing a broad array of religious beliefs and faith traditions, **we write to urge you to act with urgency to pass another COVID-19 response bill that first prioritizes vulnerable individuals and communities.** We come from a variety of faith perspectives, but our moral principles and scriptural teachings all affirm the need to prioritize vulnerable communities and struggling individuals, to welcome the stranger, and enable all people to live with dignity and the opportunity to flourish.

Thank you for acting quickly to pass the first three COVID-19 bills. However, much more is needed. This public health and economic crisis are unprecedented in scope, affecting all our communities as well as our elections. The economic fallout will persist long after the outbreak subsides, but much of the assistance is slated to end before the economy will begin to recover.

The Washington Interreligious Staff Community (WISC) comprises about 70 national religious organizations and denominations, including Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Humanist faiths or philosophies. Through working groups, we advance policies that will create a more just, peaceful and ecologically sustainable world. While not all of our organizations hold policy positions on every issue WISC works on, we do agree upon core values and tenets. **To ensure an effective and sustained recovery, we urge you to enact the following policy priorities.**

## **Domestic Human Needs:**

### **1) Food Security: Expand and increase SNAP**

During the novel coronavirus pandemic, adequate access to nutritious food is imperative to the health and wellbeing of all people. To ensure everyone has access to the food they need we call on Congress to:

- Increase SNAP benefits by 15%
- Increase the minimum monthly SNAP benefit from \$16 to \$30
- Suspend all administrative SNAP rule changes indefinitely, during this time of economic distress and long-term recovery

### **2) Housing: More money for housing, homeless assistance, moratorium on evictions**

Safe and stable housing is of the utmost importance in preventing the spread of COVID-19. Though the C.A.R.E.S. Act allocated some funding to housing and homelessness services, it was not nearly enough. The next round of COVID-19 legislation must include:

- Additional support for homelessness assistance programs, USDA rural low-income housing development programs, and emergency rental assistance for those with the greatest need;

- A national moratorium on evictions beyond federally backed mortgaged properties;
- More emergency funding and flexible allowable uses for Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

### **3) Extend expanded unemployment assistance**

The unemployment benefits enacted in the CARES Act are set to expire at the end of July and end of 2020. However, the depth and length of the economic downturn will leave many in need of continued assistance:

- Extend the Pandemic Unemployment Compensation Program (PUC), which provides an additional \$600 per week in unemployment benefits, beyond July 31.
- Extend the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance Program (PUA) beyond December 31. The PUA is available to people who have exhausted their state unemployment insurance, and people who do not qualify for the traditional state unemployment insurance. This includes the self-employed, people working in the gig, economy, etc.
- Extend the additional 13 weeks of state unemployment benefits that are available after an individual exhausted their regular state unemployment benefits.

### **4) Expand the EITC and Child Tax Credit**

The faith community supports expansion of the Child Tax Credit (CTC) to make it fully available to the 26 million low-income children who today receive only a partial credit or no credit because their incomes are too low, and a significant increase of the earned income tax credit (EITC) for childless workers, more than 5 million of whom are currently taxed into, or deeper into, poverty. These provisions are well designed both to provide needed economic stimulus and to bolster the income of millions of low- and modest-income families during what is expected to be a very difficult labor market through at least 2021.

## **Criminal Justice**

### **1) Release as many people as possible**

To stop the spread of COVID-19 at the federal, state and local levels we urge those in leadership to use available mechanisms to release as many people as possible including:

- Immediate release of the elderly and medically vulnerable
- Early release for anyone within 18 months of their release date
- Lift any ban to access social services and housing for those who will be, and who have already been released

### **2) Prioritize the general health of staff and those incarcerated**

For the general health of staff and those incarcerated we urge penal facilities at every level to:

- Make soap and water readily available and accessible for everyone
- Create, publicly release, implement, and enforce a policy, vetted by public health officials for handling COVID-19 within each facility

### **3) Boost the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of all**

Given the limitations to face to face visits and to boost the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of all, including those who are incarcerated, their families and indirectly the staff, future legislation should include:

- Free unlimited phone calls
- Free and unlimited video conference access
- Free and unlimited access to emails

### **4) Eliminate the collateral ban on questions 5 and 6 on the Small Business Administration loan application that exclude the formerly incarcerated.**

Returning citizens face many barriers to reentry, nearly 48,000 in number. COVID-19 has placed strains on communities and our economy, making help provided by the SBA crucial. The formerly incarcerated should not be excluded from SBA loans and grants.

## **Native Americans**

### **1) Ensure maximum flexibility for disbursement and implementation of Indian Country funds for addressing COVID-19.**

### **2) Funding for Victim Services in Indian Country:**

Rates of domestic and sexual violence are expected to spike in Indian Country. Currently, victims lack proper access to resources and shelters and are often forced to remain in unsafe conditions due to stay-at-home orders. We therefore ask that:

- Any future legislation to address COVID-19 includes supplemental funding for specific programs implemented by the Department of Justice (DOJ), many of which are authorized in the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), including a set-aside for tribal governments.
- An additional \$100 million Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA) set-aside for tribal governments.
- \$1 million to be split evenly between the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center and the Alaska Native Women's Resource Center.

## **Immigration**

This global pandemic has shined a light on the intersection of U.S. immigration and public health policy. This virus impacts all people, regardless of citizenship status. When one person is at greater risk of COVID-19, we are all at greater risk. In the next round of COVID-19 legislation we urge you to:

- **Release all detained immigrant children, families and adults** so that they can stay safe with their families in the U.S. and avoid contracting COVID-19. Stop ICE and CBP enforcement activities.
- **Ensure free access to medical tests and health care for all members of our communities and fully suspend the public charge rule at USCIS.**
- **End the suspension of entry to asylum seekers** and uphold U.S. and international law to protect people fleeing violence and persecution.
- **Resume refugee and special immigrant admissions expeditiously** — consistent with general travel restrictions — and extend security check validity periods for refugees and special immigrants.

## Health Care

It is critical that all people have access to quality, affordable health care during this public health crisis. In the next major package, we urge you to:

- **Expand access to testing, regardless of insurance or immigration status.** Many states do not have enough money to cover this need. Congress must significantly increase federal funding for testing, including for the uninsured and noncitizens.
- **Ensure free and accessible treatment for all.** Treatment remains inaccessible and expensive for many Americans. Congress must increase federal funding for treatment, mandate that all public and private insurance plans cover treatment without cost-sharing, and expand Medicaid coverage to provide treatment for the uninsured. Free treatment must be available to minority communities, low income individuals, and undocumented people, as disease does not distinguish by race, socioeconomic, or immigration status.
- **Provide additional Medicaid funding for states, localities, and tribes, including a significant increase to the Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP).** Congress must build on the 6.2 percentage point increase in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and implement another significant increase to meet the growing need.
- **Open a special enrollment period for health insurance.** As a result of the pandemic, millions of people are losing not only their jobs but also their employer-provided health insurance. Congress should establish a special enrollment period to ensure that newly unemployed people can become insured.
- **Direct the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to issue an Emergency Temporary Standard to protect front line health care workers.** Doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals are risking their lives to provide care during this pandemic but still lack basic workplace protections. Congress needs to direct OSHA to issue an Emergency Temporary Standard, which would require employers to create and implement certain safety protocols. These protocols should apply to private sector health care workers as well as workers in states receiving Medicaid funding.
- **Increase funding and access for mental health services.** The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant mental trauma due to job loss, death of loved ones, and social isolation. Congress should allocate significant funding for mental health services and ensure that telehealth is covered at parity with in-person care.

- **Address racial disparities and release demographic data.** Local studies suggest that communities of color, especially Black communities, are experiencing disproportionately high rates of infection and morbidity due to the coronavirus. Unfortunately, because there is no federal demographic data, the true scope of this racial disparity is unknown. Congress must direct the Administration to collect and release comprehensive demographic data (including but not limited to gender, race, ethnicity, and language access) so public health officials can begin to understand and address these disparities.

## **Voting Rights & Campaign Finance**

### **More money for vote by mail and election security:**

The \$400M for elections in the CARES Act was a welcome start but is woefully insufficient. We call for \$4 billion in the next response package for the Election Assistance Commission to support states and localities in the following:

- No-excuse absentee voting with prepaid postage (ballots must be mailed to all registered voters during an emergency).
- Extended Voter Registration Period with at least 15 days of early voting
- Same day registration
- Election contingency plans to protect the health and safety of poll workers and voters for those who cannot vote absentee. We must have as many safe voting opportunities as possible.
- Providing online voter registration.

## **Environment**

To truly reduce the harm to vulnerable populations and build a more resilient society, the next phase of pandemic relief needs to not only meet people's immediate basic needs but also recognize the interrelated nature of a global health pandemic, wealth disparity, racial inequality, and ecological decline.

We therefore urge you to craft both short-term relief and long-term recovery measures that create jobs, meet basic needs, save lives and have the co-benefit of creating a more environmentally sustainable and resilient economy for all.

### **The ongoing responses to this crisis should include:**

- Funding and resources to communities historically and currently impacted by environmental injustice to address health risks caused by air and water pollution, and to create more resilience to future disasters.
- A nationwide moratorium on shut-offs of essential utilities including water, electricity, and heat as well as increase funding for energy efficiency programs such as the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) that benefit low-income households.

- A reservation of any financial support given to the fossil fuel industry to specifically support safety, economic relief, and transition for fossil fuel workers.
- Foreign assistance for public health, humanitarian programs, food and nutrition security, clean water and sanitation, disaster preparedness and response in developing countries.
- A transition from fossil fuel dependence and support for the expansion of clean energy
- Investments in sustainable infrastructure i.e. water, energy efficiency, transportation

## **International Assistance**

The COVID-19 pandemic affects nearly every country. As it spreads, COVID-19 poses a grave threat to the Global South, where it will have disproportionate impacts on the most vulnerable.

**We urge Congress to provide no less than \$12 billion for the international response in the next legislative package**, including significant resources for emergency global health and health security activities; other forms of emergency support, such as education, nutrition and food security, gender-based violence prevention, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), and mental health; humanitarian assistance to reach displaced populations and people in conflict-affected and fragile states; and support for frontline operations of the State Department, USAID, and implementing partners, in order to address the urgent needs of the most vulnerable without discrimination.

Under today's extreme circumstances, the living conditions of the world's poor and marginalized are becoming even more dire. With countries imposing strict orders to stay at home, many face income and food shortages, as well as insecure housing. African countries face unique challenges with inadequate infrastructure, including health systems, limited financial resources, and high levels of extreme poverty. With faith-based and NGO partners helping to facilitate food, water and medical distributions, the U.S. government and its thousands of partners are critical in preventing a windfall of other calamities. Never has it been truer that none of us is safe until all of us are safe.

It will also be critical at this time to remove barriers to humanitarian assistance for emergency response. Specifically, we ask congress to encourage the administration to issue an emergency universal general license that would allow humanitarian agencies to respond to the crisis quickly and more effectively, and to suspend broad-based and sectoral sanctions that cause significant economic damage and leave populations more exposed to sickness and disease, food insecurity, and other humanitarian emergencies.

## **Peace and Security**

In order to build resilient communities, we must invest in priorities that have been consistently underfunded due to over-investment in militaristic solutions to conflict. In the first CARES Act, the Department of Defense received \$10.4 billion in additional funds- on top of the over \$738 billion they had already received this year. This extra money was given despite the Pentagon's likely massive savings in oil costs this year.

In the next COVID-19 response bill, we ask that the Pentagon receive no additional funds.

## Disability Justice

As Congress continues to address this crisis, we urge them to continue to recognize and address the needs of people with disabilities and the workers and caregivers who support them. Both the disability community and those who care for them are at a particularly high risk at this time and require additional resources as outlined below to support to their health and safety and to safeguard their civil rights.

- 1) As Medicaid is the primary provider of long-term services and supports, **we strongly reiterate the call to increase the federal medical assistance percentage (FMAP) rate to 12%**. This 5.8% increase over the funds previously designated in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act would ensure that Medicaid and state governments have the resources they need to adequately care for people with disabilities.
- 2) **Increase funding for residential facilities and other home- and community-based services (HCBS)**. Group homes and nursing homes need additional support due to increased overtime costs and the growing need for PPE. Additional funding can help keep people with disabilities in the community with adequately equipped and funded caregivers and Direct Support Professionals, therefore limiting the amount of people in institutions where the virus can easily spread.

## Global Debt

We urge Congress to move forward debt relief measures for developing countries in order to bolster health services and mitigate the economic impacts of the coronavirus. Congress should expeditiously move forward any required authorizations and appropriations of White House and Treasury commitments for debt relief for developing countries. Congress should approve use of International Monetary Fund (IMF) gold sales for the purposes of concessional financing or debt relief for developing countries. Congress should instruct the Administration and the U.S. Treasury to begin negotiations for an additional injection of capital in the World Bank Group and other Multilateral Development Banks with the goal of achieving a collective increase in providing additional lending in the amount of **USD 200 billion in the next year, and Congress should approve authorizations and appropriations commensurate with the US share of such contributions.**

Signed,

Alliance of Baptists  
American Friends Service Committee

American Jewish World Service  
Bread for the World  
Center for Freethought Equality, the advocacy arm of the American Humanist Association  
Christian Reformed Church Office of Social Justice  
Church of the Brethren Office of Peacebuilding and Policy  
Church World Service  
Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach  
Congregation of Our Lady of the Good Shepherd, US Provinces  
Disciples Center for Public Witness  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
Franciscan Action Network  
Friends Committee on National Legislation  
Interfaith Power & Light  
Islamic Relief USA  
Jewish Council for Public Affairs  
Justice Revival  
Leadership Conference of Women Religious  
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns  
Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office  
Missionary Oblates/OIP Trust  
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd  
National Council of Churches  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Religious Campaign Against Torture  
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice  
Pax Christi USA  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), Office of Public Witness  
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Mercy Justice Team  
The United Methodist Church - General Board of Church and Society  
Union for Reform Judaism  
Unitarian Universalist Association  
Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth  
Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice  
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries