

March 10, 2020

Dear Members of Congress,

The coronavirus, a new strain of which causes COVID-19, is primarily a public health crisis, as it begins to spread across the United States and threatens the lives and health of the most vulnerable members of our communities.

It also presents an economic challenge. Growing economic repercussions of the virus are straining many workers and employers, forcing them to take measures that could contribute further to an economic slowdown. The necessary precautionary steps to prevent further spread - travel limitations, quarantines, business and school closures, and more – will also have negative economic consequences that ripple throughout communities.

The virus is exposing weaknesses in our labor laws and social insurance systems as workers cannot take paid time off if they are sick, be assured of access to medical help, or be able to meet basic needs should they be laid off as a consequence of the virus. There are a number of important policy tools that Congress and the administration can use to limit the spread and harm of the virus and prevent it from wreaking economic havoc – including shoring up our unemployment insurance (UI) system.

UI is an important tool for family stability and economic stability. When workers are laid off through no fault of their own, unemployment insurance provides partial and temporary wage replacement, helping families weather the economic storm, and shoring up demand in the economy to help prevent further job loss. Unfortunately, like many other parts of our social insurance system, unemployment insurance has faced years of cutbacks, in this case by state governments who manage and administer the program with limited federal oversight. Absent federal investments and reforms to strengthen it, will not live up to its full potential to help families, communities, and the economy writ large rebound quickly from COVID-19.

To that end, our organizations are making the following recommendations:

1.) Get help to more families facing corona-related job loss more quickly, preventing widespread economic hardship, bolstering macroeconomic response to slow additional job losses, and helping affected families and communities get back on their feet more quickly. This includes steps such as:

- Updating the Stafford Act to allow for individuals to apply for Disaster Unemployment Assistance without exhausting regular UI first, enabling states to avoid spending down their UI trust funds right away.
- Raising the minimum benefit amount to 1.5 the times of the national average state UI benefit (\$531).
- Requiring states to waive waiting weeks, so involuntarily unemployed workers can receive benefits as soon as possible. Generally, when workers become unemployed, it takes a week to satisfy all the requirements to receive unemployment insurance, during which the worker receives no payment. In the case of the coronavirus, many workers could struggle to meet these requirements in a timely manner.

- Providing emergency administrative funding for state unemployment insurance programs, since need will rise, and the federal government bears statutory responsibility for the costs of state administration.

2.) Support workers who need to balance work and new caregiving responsibilities related to coronavirus: This includes steps such as:

- Expanding the definition of good cause quits to caregiving responsibilities – including if school closures related to the virus affect parents and caregivers’ ability to work.
- Requiring states to make part-time workers eligible – particularly as more workers may need to work part-time with potential school closures or caregiving responsibilities.
- Preventing job loss by expanding worksharing within unemployment insurance. Worksharing would allow for companies to move full-time workers to part-time status while workers get compensated through UI for reduced hours. Worksharing exists in only 27 states and the District of Columbia, and should be required for every state, with a generous federal match for administrative costs for new and existing programs.

3.) Empower employees and employers to prevent further spread of the virus. This includes steps such as:

- Expanding the definition of good cause quit to employees refusing an assignment that violates health and safety standards.
- Waiving work search requirements so that people can stay home as is recommended by public health officials, especially since job search for many low-paid jobs requires in-person interviews.
- Helping states to provide UI-related services such as career counseling and reemployment assistance remotely.
- Making sure claims related to the pandemic don’t count against experience rating so that employers are not penalized for cutting back on business for health-related reasons.

Unemployment insurance has the potential to be an important tool to help protect families and stabilize our economy during these uncertain times, but only if lawmakers act immediately to strengthen protections for unemployed workers. We urge lawmakers to act with the urgency required, and to strengthen the unemployment insurance system writ large so that our country is more prepared to help families, communities and the economy going forward.

Respectfully,

9to5
 AFL-CIO
 African American Health Alliance
 Allied Progress
 American Association of People with Disabilities
 American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
 AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS
 Americans for Democratic Action (ADA)
 Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, AFL-CIO
 Bread for the World

Center for American Progress
Center for Independence
Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)
Civic Ventures
Coalition on Human Needs
Economic Policy Institute
Every Child Matters
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Futures Without Violence
Indivisible
Main Street Alliance
MomsRising
MoveOn
NAACP
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Center for Law and Economic Justice
National Coalition for the Homeless
National Disability Rights Network
National Domestic Workers Alliance
National Education Association
National Employment Law Project
National Employment Lawyers Association
National Health Care for the Homeless Council
National Health Care for the Homeless Council
National Immigration Law Center
National LGBTQ Task Force Action Fund
National Low Income Housing Coalition
National Network to End Domestic Violence
National WIC Association
National Women's Law Center
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
Oxfam America
People's Action
Resilience Force
RESULTS
Service Employees International Union
The Arc of the United States
The Forum for Youth Investment
The Jewish Federations of North America
The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
Ujima Inc: The National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community
Unemployment Law Project
Union for Reform Judaism
Voices for Progress
Workplace Fairness
World Institute on Disability