



September 14, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
 Speaker  
 House of Representatives  
 Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
 Minority Leader United States  
 House of Representatives  
 Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
 Majority Leader  
 United States Senate  
 Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer  
 Minority Leader  
 United States Senate  
 Washington, DC 20510

**RE: PEOPLE DESERVE URGENT RELIEF: REQUEST TO PASS A COMPREHENSIVE COVID-19 RELIEF PACKAGE TO SAVE THE USPS, ENSURE VOTE BY MAIL, PASS OSHA STANDARDS AND ENSURE THE MANUFACTURE OF PPE TO PROTECT WORKERS, CANCEL EVICTIONS AND RENT, IMPOSE A UTILITY SHUTOFF MORATORIUM, REJECT CORPORATE LIABILITY WAIVERS, AND ENSURE STATE AND LOCAL FUNDING**

Dear Leader McConnell, Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and Leader McCarthy:

On behalf of our millions of members and supporters, we, the undersigned parties — including consumer rights protection groups; labor unions; environmental, climate, and utility justice organizations; and civil rights, faith, and democracy groups — urge Congress to stop delaying and pass a critically needed, just, equitable, and inclusive COVID-19 package for immediate and long-term relief.

Unlike Congress, the people did not take recess and are facing not only the pandemic and an unprecedented economic crisis but also climate-induced wildfires, heat waves, and flooding that are obliterating entire communities. The people deserve urgent relief. The Republican Senate's unconscionable delay in passing another COVID-19 package yields fatal consequences. Every single day of August, an average of 1,000 people died from the virus, accumulating to an unforgivable and shameful total of nearly 188,000 deaths as of the letter's date<sup>1</sup> — a product of the premature openings of state economies and the government's continued failure to enforce social distancing measures and protect frontline workers and all people with personal protective equipment.

The result is an unprecedented level of chaos across the country, exacerbated by climate-induced disasters of fire, heat, and floods. The United States Postal Service faces an onslaught of defunding threats — not only undermining an essential service to the public, but also risking the unraveling of one of the most consequential elections in modern U.S. history by obstructing vote-by-mail and the country's democratic foundations. September 1 marked new evictions and utility shutoffs across the country. The federal eviction moratorium has lifted without new Congressional action, potentially leaving 40 million people without shelter.<sup>2</sup> The unprecedented loss of livelihoods has lodged families in the impossible position of losing access to their basic human rights — including power, water, and broadband — due to the inability to pay their utility bills. Children across the country have begun schooling for the year without guaranteed access to the broadband necessary to connect with their schools, and massive teacher layoffs are projected as state and local governments are forced to make spending cuts without federal support coming in. State and local governments have taken the brunt of providing services to communities during the COVID pandemic and face bankruptcy without further federal support. All the while, a corporate liability shield floated as an attachment to a stimulus package places corporate safeguards over people's lives — making the disgraceful decision of protecting Corporate America over Americans.

What is more, the coronavirus and its crisis progeny disproportionately impact Black, Latinx, Indigenous and other communities of color, as well as low-wealth families. Black and Latinx residents are three times as likely to become infected by the virus and twice as likely to die from the virus in comparison to their white counterparts.<sup>3</sup> Black workers also disproportionately bear the brunt of job loss.<sup>4</sup> In the Navajo Nation, an estimated 30% of people do not have access to running water, a critical line of

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<sup>1</sup> Joe Fox, Brittany Renee Mayes, Kevin Schaul and Leslie Shapiro, "Live tracker: At least 159,000 people have died from the coronavirus in the U.S.," THE WASHINGTON POST, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/national/coronavirus-us-casesdeaths/> (last updated September 11, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Annie Nova, "The pandemic may cause 40 million Americans to lose their homes," CNBC, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/07/30/what-its-like-to-be-evicted-during-the-coivd-19-pandemic.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Opiel, Robert Gebeloff, K.J. Rebecca Lai, Will Wright, and Mitch Smith, "The fullest look yet at the racial inequity of coronavirus," THE NEW YORK TIMES, July 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/05/us/coronavirus-latinosafican-americans-cdc-data.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Waller and Jane Clayson, "Racial inequality: Black workers face 'devastating job loss' during the pandemic, study says," WBUR, June 5, 2020, <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2020/06/05/job-loss-black-americans-economy-racism>.

defense in protecting oneself and one's community against the impacts of COVID-19.<sup>5</sup> In the wake of the death of George Floyd and countless other Black men and women, the COVID crisis amplifies the deeper pandemic of systemic racism in the United States.

We thank the House of Representatives and particular Senate champions for fighting for common sense protections of people during this unprecedented crisis. A just, equitable, and inclusive stimulus and relief package is not a partisan issue. There is no time to waste. We urge the Senate to stop delay and pass a relief package that includes the following provisions to fully address the crises facing the country.

## **1. SAVE THE U.S. POSTAL SERVICE AND ENSURE VOTE-BY-MAIL VOTING ACCESS**

The immediate financial crisis facing the U.S. Postal Service (“USPS”) has been caused by the pandemic and the related economic downturn. That’s why postal workers and the people of the country are united in urging Congress to pass \$25 billion in emergency funding for COVID-related relief to the Postal Service.

It is crucial that Congress include at least \$25 billion for the USPS in the next round of stimulus legislation. These funds are necessary to continue the service that postal workers provide the American people. Postal workers are essential workers who process and deliver mail every day that includes vital provisions like lifesaving medical supplies, critical information about the pandemic, and even distribute vote-by-mail systems so our democracy can operate amidst COVID-19.

## **2. EXTEND AND IMPOSE A FEDERAL MORATORIUM ON EVICTIONS AND CANCEL RENT**

Even before the crisis, more than half of American renters couldn’t afford a \$400 emergency. Forty-seven percent of renters spent more than a third of their income on rent, while 25 million people paid more than half of their income to their landlord. Now, due to layoffs and mass unemployment, even more renters are making choices between food and rent, accruing debts, and at risk of being forced from their homes. On September 1, state eviction bans lifted, putting thousands of families across the U.S. in precarity.

We demand that you pass the Rent and Mortgage Cancellation Act (H.R. 6515) to ensure that, for the duration of the crisis, there would be no rent obligation, no late fees, and no debts for housing. In addition, the legislation would suspend mortgage payments and ensure relief for property owners, conditioned on critical tenant protections. This policy is designed to bring necessary relief to renters and property owners in the midst of a crisis, and it begins to lay the groundwork for the longer-term Homes Guarantee we need. We urge our elected leaders of Congress to use the Rent and Mortgage Cancellation Act as the model for negotiating an immediate solution.

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<sup>5</sup> Ronda Lee Chapman, “Coronavirus has laid bare the racial fault lines in access to clean, safe water,” THE GUARDIAN, June 30, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/30/coronavirus-clean-safe-water-racial-fault-lines>.

### **3. IMPOSE A MORATORIUM ON UTILITY SHUTOFFS**

Due to the Great Depression-era unemployment crisis, millions of families have lost or at risk of soon losing access to basic human rights — water, electricity, and broadband — because they cannot afford their utility bills.<sup>6</sup> That is unacceptable. These utility services must be retained to fight the health pandemic and to ensure basic family survival in these unprecedented times of climate-induced wildfires, hurricanes, flooding, and heat waves.

We urge you to enact The Emergency Water and Energy is a Human Right Act (S. 4362) and the CONNECT At Home Act (S. 3695). We demand you impose a robust nationwide moratorium on water, power, and broadband shutoffs that (a) applies to all power, water, and broadband services, regardless of private or public ownership; (b) lasts for the duration of the national emergency and a sufficient grace period of at least an additional 180 days beyond the emergency’s end to allow families to recover from unemployment and other coronavirus-related impacts; (c) reinstates all households whose services have already been cut off; (d) waives all late payment fee accrual on utility bills through the end of the grace period; and (e) forgives all bill payments for low-wealth people through the end of the grace period. We also seek legislation to provide long-term stimulus funds to boost distributed, clean energy systems, public water systems, and high-speed broadband adoption.

Over [830 organizations](#), [500 faith leaders](#), [113 Congress Members](#) have urged for this utility shutoff moratorium, including testimonials from Leader [Schumer](#), Senators [Merkley](#), [Brown](#), and [Warren](#), and Representatives Tlaib, Pallone, and Dingell.

### **4. PASS PROTECTIVE OSHA STANDARDS AND ENSURE THE USE OF THE DEFENSE PRODUCTION ACT TO MANUFACTURE AND ALLOCATE PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT FOR ALL FRONTLINE WORKERS**

Health care workers, food service workers, flight attendants, pilots, bus drivers, train conductors, custodial staff, frontline public sector workers and other essential workers are at the frontlines of battling COVID-19 and enabling the country’s very survival. Employers continue to put the lives of their frontline workers at unnecessary risk by failing to provide the personal protective equipment (“PPE”) workers need as they deliver these essential services.

We urge you to use all powers of the federal government to establish a comprehensive, transparent, and efficient medical supply chain system. We need Congress to take action to ensure that the Defense Production Act is fully invoked in order to rapidly increase production of PPE and other critical medical supplies. It is also critical that Congress ensures that the federal government increases transparency and accountability measures to track our medical supply chain, and ensure efficient distribution of critical medical supplies across acute care, home care and long term care settings, as well as to other industries whose workers confront the risk of exposure on a daily basis in their workplace.

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<sup>6</sup> Alana Semuels, “A ‘Tidal Wave’ of Power Cuts May be Coming as Electric Companies Resume Shutoffs,” TIME, Aug. 31, 2020, <https://time.com/5884556/power-cuts-coronavirus/>.

And we urge you to require the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (“OSHA”) to issue an emergency temporary standard to protect frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to prevent any further erosion of health and safety guidelines throughout the federal government and across the economy.

## **5. REJECT CORPORATE LIABILITY WAIVERS**

We urge you to categorically reject any liability shield for corporations and instead issue clear safety guidelines on how businesses need to operate if they’re going to reopen. Essential workers shouldn’t have to risk their lives for a paycheck, and risks from COVID-19 fall disproportionately on low-income workers of color. The proposal to shield corporations from liability would limit workers from suing employers who put their lives at risk by forcing them to go back to work in unsafe conditions. The fossil fuel industry has been a global source of coronavirus infection and in particular stands to benefit from this liability shield. We appreciate Minority Leader Schumer and Representative McEachin for joining a tele-press conference to “Hold the Line against Corporate Immunity” on August 5, 2020 and urge you to ensure this insidious proposal is soundly rejected.

## **6. FINANCE STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TO ENSURE CONTINUED SERVICES**

State and local governments are in desperate need of additional funding. Due to the Administration’s chaotic response, state and local governments have been on the front lines of this crisis, using their finite resources to fund a public health response while meeting higher demand for core services. At the same time, economic activity has fallen off and it’s not coming back until people feel safe and protected.

Already 1.5 million state and local workers have been laid off and more layoff are expected. There have been cuts to schools, health care, and other core public investments even as COVID-19 continues to spread, schools struggle to re-open, and an increasing number of people need health coverage through Medicaid and other essential public services to get by. It’s imperative to get new federal funds to our public workers who keep our communities running and make sure that during a pandemic our healthcare system has the resources it needs.

We’re calling for at least \$1 trillion dollars for state and local public services, a significant increase in Medicaid, and additional funding for colleges and all public schools to help ensure that they can provide quality education and safely re-open as appropriate for their area; no education funding should be tied to in-person instruction requirements.

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It is imperative that Congress immediately pass a relief package. There is no time for delay.

Thank you for your consideration of this urgent request.<sup>7</sup>

Sincerely,

**Lead Organizations for Save U.S. Postal Service and Ensure Vote-by-Mail Voting Access**

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<sup>7</sup> For any questions regarding this letter, please reach out to Jean Su at the Center for Biological Diversity ([jsu@biologicaldiversity.org](mailto:jsu@biologicaldiversity.org)) or Elizabeth Schuster at Food and Water Watch ([eschuster@fwwatch.org](mailto:eschuster@fwwatch.org)).

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