

# Protecting Children and Families During the COVID-19 Pandemic



On Wednesday, March 18, the Senate will take up the House-passed Families First Coronavirus Response Act, as the next step in providing relief from the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic. This bipartisan legislation is a very promising first step toward ensuring that vulnerable children and families are not disproportionately impacted by this public health crisis. Congress is expected to enact additional coronavirus packages as soon as later this week to address other urgent needs – of which there are many for children and families that this bill does not address.

## The Families First Coronavirus Response Act includes these critical provisions for children and families:

- Increasing Access to Affordable Health Care
  - Provides free COVID-19 testing to all Americans, regardless of their insurance status.
  - Medicaid and CHIP will cover COVID-19 diagnostic testing, including the cost of a provider visit to receive testing, at no cost to the patient.
  - Increases federal funding to the states for Medicaid and CHIP for the duration of the COVID-19 public health emergency.
- Expanding Food Assistance Programs to Meet Increased Needs for Children and Other Vulnerable Populations
  - Gives states the ability to provide food assistance to households with children who would otherwise receive free or reduced-price school meals at school which are now closed through the use of Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards.
  - Suspends work requirements for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) during the emergency and allows states to request waivers for emergency CR-SNAP benefits to existing SNAP households up to the maximum monthly allotment.
  - Provides an additional \$500 million for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to provide nutrition assistance for children and their mothers during this emergency. It also allows participants to be certified for WIC without being physically present at a WIC clinic.
  - Helps local food banks meet increased need with an additional \$400 million for The Emergency Food Assistance Program.
  - Allows child and adult care centers to serve food to go.
- Ensuring Paid Sick Leave
  - Provides employees of employers with under 500 employees the right to two weeks of fully-paid leave when they are sick, or two weeks of paid leave at two-thirds of their normal rate to care for a family member.
  - Provides employees of employers with under 500 employees the right to take up to 12-weeks of job-protected leave.
- Increases Unemployment Insurance (UI) Benefits
  - Includes \$1 billion in 2020 emergency grants to states to meet the increased need for UI benefits.

While this is an important step forward for children and families, it does not go far enough. More action is needed to protect all children and families, particularly our most vulnerable.

**The next coronavirus relief package must include:**

- Direct cash assistance for adults and children to ensure families can make ends meet during this crisis.
- A nationwide boost in SNAP benefits, to ensure increased access to nutritious foods for every SNAP household
- Protections for families having trouble making the rent, through emergency assistance for families potentially facing eviction and a nationwide moratorium on evictions.
- Additional funding for Public Housing Authorities and emergency services for individuals experiencing homelessness.
- Expand child welfare funding to help states meet the needs of the child welfare system, particularly the unique needs of older youth in foster care, grandparents and other older adults caring for children, and supporting the child welfare workforce to continue doing their work safely.
- Significantly increase funding for the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG), which can help states provide critical services and supports tailored to the needs of their community. These funds can fill in some of the gaps not covered above and backfill a number of human services given the flexibility of SSBG. This also needs to include a set-aside for Tribes, which does not currently exist.
- Flexible emergency funding for child care and Head Start programs including direct assistance to programs based on enrollment and payments to programs and workers in the case of closures, the need for substitute educators, and continued care for children whose families are no longer able to afford the services.
- Education Preparedness and Support Grants to governors to support K-12 schools and higher education institutions through closures – including continued meal programs - and provide emergency financial aid for college students in need of food, housing, and healthcare following abrupt school closures.
- Additional federal financial support for state Medicaid programs, including an additional increase in the federal matching rates to states and other efforts to support the health care workforce during this crisis.
- Mandatory 12-month continuous eligibility in Medicaid and CHIP to ensure no child or parent loses health coverage in the midst of a public health crisis due to bureaucratic red-tape. Additional efforts to reduce and eliminate administrative barriers for states and families should also be taken.
- Expanded comprehensive emergency paid sick days and paid family and medical leave bill—fully funded by the federal government during this emergency—to provide additional support to workers and businesses during the coronavirus outbreak and future public health emergencies.
- Relief and access to services for all families -- regardless of immigration status. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should immediately issue public statements assuring immigrants that accessing health care services will not put them at risk of immigration enforcement. DHS should also ensure that immigration enforcement actions do not take place at or near health clinics, hospitals, or other places where individuals may be receiving health services related to the coronavirus, including receipt of testing or vaccines should they become widely available.