



April 27, 2020

Dear Member of Congress:

On behalf of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, we write to provide an overview of the priorities of the civil and human rights coalition for upcoming action in response to the COVID-19 crisis. While we recognize the important steps taken by Congress to date, including the enactment of the Families First Act and the CARES Act, Congress has much more to do to ensure that the public's health is protected, that our vital institutions are preserved and strengthened, and that our eventual economic recovery works for everyone.

No matter what we look like, where we live, or what is in our wallets, getting sick reminds us that at our core we are all the same. But we cannot ignore the pandemic's disproportionate effect on the people and communities we represent; it is an indictment of our failure to rid American institutions of longstanding institutional racism and systemic inequality. Through health and education disparities, income inequality, discrimination in voting and housing, unequal treatment within the legal system, and the digital divide, communities of color have been routinely locked out and left behind – and sadly, as we have seen in increased hate violence and in far worse health outcomes for people of color, this pandemic is no different.

Our coalition's task forces have already provided, or soon will provide, greater detail to guide you on what specific steps should be taken as an effective and fair response to this crisis, but we hope the following summary provides a useful roadmap of our key priorities for relief until the economic fallout of this pandemic comes to an end.

Ensuring Equal Access to Quality Health Care: A virus such as COVID-19 does not discriminate. Yet the pandemic has exposed glaring structural disparities, including in access to preventive, urgent, and long-term health care, resulting in increased vulnerabilities and far worse outcomes for some communities and heightening the threat to everyone. Congress must ensure free and widespread testing, treatment, and eventual vaccination for all people; ensure that disaggregated demographic data on testing, cases, and outcomes is made publicly available; protect the Affordable Care Act and increase access to care; enhance federal Medicaid assistance; and provide additional support for people with disabilities, seniors, and other vulnerable populations. Congress must also provide sufficient funding to ensure materials and services are accessible to Limited English Proficient (LEP) people and produce enough protective medical equipment so that tragic shortages can be held to a minimum.

Providing More Relief for our Most Marginalized Communities: As unemployment has skyrocketed, and with so much uncertainty about when and how our economy will recover, the need for strong safety net policies to ensure basic human needs are being met is greater than ever. Congress must provide recurring, direct cash assistance during this severe economic crisis that targets aid to all vulnerable people in our country, including immigrants and formerly incarcerated people; increase access to SNAP relief; expand the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit; ensure widespread and uninterrupted access to clean water, [internet](#), and other home utilities; and protect access to, and the safety of, public transit systems nationwide.

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Protecting the Most Vulnerable Working People: It is a sad reality that many of our most vital working people – those who still leave home daily and risk their lives to deliver our care, our food, our mail, and other essentials – are faced with inadequate protections to their health and economic well-being. Meanwhile, countless low-income employees who have been sidelined are also highly vulnerable to illness or financial insecurity. Congress must ensure that all workers have access to paid sick leave; enhance unemployment assistance; and ensure that all frontline working people are safe and fairly paid. Congress must also ensure that the SBA’s loan programs are reaching all communities and meeting fair lending obligations.

Safeguarding Homes and Financial Health and Providing Shelter to Those Most in Need: The CARES Act took important first steps in reducing homelessness, evictions, and foreclosures. But more resources and policies are needed to protect homeless people. Congress should also improve the complicated and confusing patchwork of federal, state, and private protections against evictions and foreclosures, and protect the financial security of families from abusive small-dollar lending, debt collection, and credit reporting practices. Finally, Congress must take strong action to reduce student debt, which poses a long-term threat to any economic recovery.

Reducing Law Enforcement Responses and the Risks to Incarcerated People and Corrections Employees: Jails, prisons, and immigrant detention centers face a public health catastrophe due to overcrowded and unsafe conditions, particularly for those who are older or have existing health problems. Meanwhile, law enforcement has targeted people of color as they have enforced stay-at-home orders and requirements to wear masks. Congress must a) support the immediate release of as many people as possible from [jails](#), [prisons](#), and immigrant detention centers; b) increase testing and provide adequate health care and [communications](#) for all people who remain in custody; c) incentivize law enforcement to reduce arrests and end jail bookings; d) ensure that federal funding to law enforcement agencies prioritizes [public education and awareness](#) of the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color, limits arrests and citations for failure to comply with public health ordinances, and requires the implementation of bias and anti-profiling policies and trainings; e) invest in mental health, community outreach, and social services to end the use of police in addressing public health crises; and f) remove barriers to people with records accessing social safety net programs and services upon release.

Combatting Sharp Increase in Hate Crimes: Racist and xenophobic rhetoric from leaders and a sharp increase in acts of hate have accompanied the spread of the coronavirus. Asian Americans, immigrants, and communities of color are now confronting a terrifying rise in hate crimes, and we are also seeing an increase in calls for violence against the LGBTQ community, Muslims, Jews, and people with disabilities. Directing some of the funding already going to law enforcement towards the long-overdue appropriation of funds under the Shepard-Byrd Act would ensure that communities have the resources necessary to combat the devastating increase in hate violence that has accompanied this pandemic.

Minimizing Learning Loss, Ensuring Equal Educational Opportunity, and Protecting Student Loan Borrowers: Our educational system was deeply inequitable before this crisis, and long-term school closures, while necessary, only add to the barriers marginalized students face. While schools are closed, Congress must ensure marginalized students have equitable access to distance learning and school meals, while ensuring our civil rights laws – including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act – remain intact and protect students. Congress must also take steps to reduce educational disparities, as well as to ensure access to early childhood education, so that when schools reopen those who have been most left behind have an opportunity to catch up. Additionally, especially because of the compounding barriers students of color face, Congress should cancel student loan debt to provide a more equal opportunity.

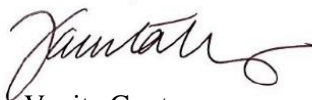


Protecting Our Democracy: In 2020, the fate and future of our democracy hang in the balance. The primary election fiasco in Wisconsin – where voters were forced to risk their health in order to exercise their fundamental right to vote – underscored the tremendous need for Congress to provide additional financial assistance to states amidst the worst public health crisis this nation has witnessed in over a century. The CARES Act provided \$400 million to help states prepare for the 2020 elections, but experts have determined that at least \$3.6 billion in additional funding is needed so states can administer this year’s elections in a safe, fair, and accessible manner through the implementation of vote-by-mail and the expansion of early voting and in-person voting options. Unless states offer voters an expanded range of voting options, millions of historically disenfranchised citizens will not have equal access to the ballot box, and the promise of our democracy will not be fulfilled.

Ensuring a Fair and Accurate Census: In response to necessary guidelines on physical distancing to protect public health, the U.S. Census Bureau suspended field operations until June 1 and requested an extension of the enumeration period until October 31, 2020. We support this updated timeline because it takes into account the need to safeguard the health of residents and census workers alike, and it provides a viable option for a full and effective nonresponse follow-up operation that is essential to reach vulnerable communities. At the same time, Congress should take immediate action to evaluate, understand, and address the severe disruption the COVID-19 crisis has caused for successful conduct of the 2020 Census. We cannot compromise either the health of our communities or the fairness and accuracy of the census.

Our nation faces tremendous uncertainty due to a public health crisis that we are still struggling to fully understand, but we will ultimately get through this if we pull together and do what is best for everyone. The future is what we must create together. We have to unite across our differences and reimagine what our commitment truly is to one another. It is profoundly important that the eventual recovery works for everyone, and that Congress adopts policies that leave us in a better place. In the coming weeks and months, we look forward to working with you to that end.

Sincerely,



Vanita Gupta
President and CEO