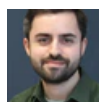


HEROES Relief Extends to Some Major Energy & Environmental Needs

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With the economic crisis caused by the pandemic only deepening, House Democrats have put forward a [rescue bill](#) that provides critical medical, financial, and other assistance for American families and businesses. This includes vital protections for low-income and minority Americans who have borne the worst impacts of the coronavirus pandemic. With at least 80,000 lives tragically lost in the United States and the spread of COVID-19 far from under control, it makes sense for Congress to stay focused on urgent relief efforts. Still, the House bill includes a handful of forward-thinking policies that will help clear the way for recovery measures to stimulate a stronger, cleaner economy.

HEROES TO THE RESCUE

The HEROES Act contains immediate relief for our most vulnerable citizens, including protection against pollution and increasingly severe weather. The measure wisely contains \$1.5 billion in additional funding for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program that helps low-income households pay their heating and cooling bills (LIHEAP funding in the CARES Act will not be enough to meet increasing needs). The rescue bill would also authorize \$50 million in environmental justice grants to determine why COVID-19 is having a disproportionate effect on low-income citizens, communities of color, tribal and indigenous communities, and other groups. The grants can also start addressing those disparities.

This funding won't correct the glaringly apparent injustices these communities are facing. The act, however, is a start to addressing these problems. Additional funding for LIHEAP would provide support for paying energy bills at a time when access to energy and clean water is essential to staying healthy at home, and as some utilities see their bottom lines take a hit through either self-imposed or state-mandated suspension of shutoffs. President Donald Trump has repeatedly tried to zero out this program. The grants for environmental justice would help identify ways we can begin to stanch the devastation COVID-19 has wrought in certain communities, many of which are the same communities that feel the brunt of other crises like climate change and pollution from energy production. The grants proposed in the HEROES Act could be used to avoid these outcomes in the future.

These are good first steps that Congress should enact now, and then build upon them in future stimulus efforts.

Forward-Thinking Policy

The HEROES Act also includes some provisions that will set us up for future success by ensuring our transit systems can continue running and that our state Departments of Transportation are staffed up in advance of future clean infrastructure investment.

Even as cities have shut down and transit systems have reduced their service levels, public transit has been critical for helping essential workers like hospital workers and pharmacists get to work. We need to make sure transit systems can continue running at a service level that will allow essential workers to practice social distancing on buses and trains. This will be especially important as communities start reopening in the coming weeks and months and demand for transit starts increasing again.

Keeping the trains and buses running is also important for fighting climate change. Transit provides people with a lower-carbon alternative to driving – but if Americans turn towards personal car use due to service reductions or if riders aren't confident in their safety, it will

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undo the progress transit agencies have made and make it harder to cut greenhouse gas emissions from transportation in the future.

The CARES Act included \$25 billion in emergency operating assistance for transit systems, and the HEROES Act builds on that with an additional \$15.75 billion. This still might not be enough: The American Public Transportation Association has asked for \$23.8 billion, and five of the largest transit agencies in the country have asked for \$33 billion for FY20 and FY21, recognizing that farebox revenues will continue to be lower than usual for a long time to come.

The additional funding in the HEROES Act is a good next step, and Congress should continue monitoring transit agencies' needs and stand ready to provide additional support as needed. Once Congress turns toward economic stimulus, they should prioritize transit maintenance and construction projects that create jobs, take cars off the road, and reduce emissions.

The HEROES Act also provides \$15 billion for state, territory, and tribal DOTs and some local transportation agencies to cover salaries and expenses, as many of these bureaus struggle with reduced revenues during the crisis. We need to keep state DOTs well-staffed if we're going to push a huge influx of infrastructure spending through them in the months ahead and must make sure state DOTs have the capacity to spend the money quickly and manage more projects so we can create more jobs as quickly as possible.

House Democrats are right to provide support for state DOTs. They should follow it up by ensuring any future infrastructure investments are targeted towards clean infrastructure projects that will create the most jobs.

Will the Senate Step Up?

Out of the gate, Senate Republicans are painting HEROES as a messaging bill, refusing to consider these provisions of support for vital services. Senate Majority Whip John Thune (R-S.D.) called the bill an insincere “laundry list of agenda items that have nothing to do with the coronavirus” and “a messaging exercise,” while Republican Conference Chairman John Barrasso (R-Wyo.) said point-blank it “will never pass the Senate.”

The fact of the matter is, Americans need more COVID-19 relief than Congress has provided so far. As we speak, families are struggling to pay energy bills, transit agencies don't have enough money to sustain service through the crisis, and state budgets are drying up, meaning they won't be equipped to efficiently carry out infrastructure projects and other federally-backed stimulus measures when the time comes. If Republicans refuse to acknowledge and address these issues swiftly, Americans of all political stripes will suffer. The crisis will only deepen without the speed and scale of relief put forward in the HEROES Act.