



# COALITION ON HUMAN NEEDS

## *The Human Needs Report*

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### IN THIS EDITION:

#### The 117<sup>th</sup> Congress Begins and the Biden Administration Takes the Reins

COVID-19:

[President Biden's American Rescue Plan Would Improve the Lives of Millions of Americans. Here's How.](#)

IMMIGRATION:

[Advocates Praise President Biden's Day One Immigration Bill](#)

BIDEN ADMINISTRATION:

[President Biden Signs Dozens of Executive Actions Affecting Human Needs Priorities](#)

[Hearings and Confirmations Begin for President Biden's Cabinet Picks](#)

117<sup>th</sup> CONGRESS

[The Senate Changes Hands](#)

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The 117<sup>th</sup> Congress convened on Jan. 3, and President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris were sworn into office on Jan. 20. Here's what Congress and the new Biden Administration have been working on so far this year.

#### **President Biden's American Rescue Plan would improve the lives of millions of Americans. Here's how.**

President Biden has proposed a robust \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package that significantly builds upon the \$1.7 trillion relief bill passed by Congress last March as well as the smaller, \$900 billion measure approved in December.

Known as the [American Rescue Plan](#), Biden's proposal includes larger stimulus checks, more aid for the unemployed, help for the hungry and those facing eviction, increased funding for vaccinations, additional support for small businesses, state and local governments and schools, and an increase in the minimum wage to \$15. And it would provide more money for child care, extend and expand low-income tax credits, and extend paid sick and family leave.

Here are many of the key components of the American Rescue Plan:

### **Beefed-up stimulus payments**

The plan calls for sending another \$1,400 per person to eligible recipients – this would be on top of the \$600 payments Congress approved in December, for a total of \$2,000. The new payments would go to households with mixed immigrant status, who were left out of the \$1,200 stimulus payments passed by Congress last spring. And the new payments would cover adult dependents who did not receive the December stimulus checks, such as children over the age of 17 who are included as dependents on their parents' tax returns.

### **Enhanced unemployment aid**

Biden has proposed increasing federal unemployment assistance to \$400 a week, from the \$300 weekly payment Congress approved in December. More importantly, he would extend the payments all the way through September; they currently are scheduled to expire in March. The President's proposal includes not just this federal add-on to state unemployment assistance, but also the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation program, which applies to jobless Americans who have exhausted their state benefits, and the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program, which provides benefits to the self-employed, independent contractors, gig workers, and certain others affected by the pandemic.

### **Help for the hungry**

Biden's plan would extend the 15 percent increase in SNAP benefits through September, instead of having it expire in June. He would invest another \$3 billion to help women, infants and children secure food (through the WIC program), and give U.S. territories \$1 billion in nutrition assistance. And he would partner with restaurants to provide food to needy Americans and jobs to laid-off restaurant workers.

### **Rental assistance and eviction moratorium**

The American Rescue Plan would extend the federal eviction moratorium, which had been set to expire at the end of January, to September 30, and would provide similar relief to homeowners with federally-guaranteed mortgages. It would provide \$25 billion in rental assistance for low- and moderate-income households who have lost jobs during the pandemic – that's in addition to the \$25 billion lawmakers provided in December. Another \$5 billion would be set aside to help struggling renters pay their utility bills. And it would include \$5 billion to help states and localities assist those at risk of experiencing homelessness.

### **Increased support for vaccines and testing**

Biden calls for investing \$20 billion in a national vaccination program, including launching community vaccination centers around the country and mobile units in hard-to-reach areas. Biden would also increase federal support to vaccinate Medicaid enrollees. The proposal would also invest \$50 billion in testing, providing funds to purchase rapid tests, expand lab capacity and help schools implement regular testing to support reopening safely. It would also fund the hiring of 100,000 public health workers, nearly tripling the community health workforce. It would address health disparities by expanding community health centers and health services on tribal lands. And it would provide support to long-term care facilities experiencing outbreaks and to prisons for mitigation strategies.

### **More health coverage**

The Biden plan proposes to subsidize COBRA health insurance for unemployed people who lost employer health coverage when they lost their jobs, and to expand and increase the Premium Tax Credit offered through the Affordable Care Act to limit the cost of health insurance to 8.5 percent of income. There would also be \$4 billion for increased substance use disorder and mental health treatment, and \$20 billion for veterans' health care.

### **More help for survivors of domestic violence**

The American Rescue Plan includes \$800 million in supplemental funding for programs to protect women and girls from domestic violence and sexual assault, more prevalent during the pandemic because people are more likely to be confined to their homes.

### **More assistance for small businesses**

The plan calls for providing \$15 billion to create a new grant program for small business owners, separate from the existing Paycheck Protection Program. It also proposes making a \$35 billion investment in some state, local, tribal, and non-profit financing programs that make low-interest loans and provide venture capital to entrepreneurs.

### **Aid for state and local governments, transit, and schools**

Biden proposes sending \$350 billion to state, local, and territorial governments to keep their frontline workers employed, distribute the vaccine, increase testing, reopen schools, and maintain vital services. The plan also includes \$20 billion to Tribal governments to increase access to clean water, electricity, and the internet, and to pay for personal protective equipment. Biden's plan would also give \$20 billion to the hardest-hit public transit agencies to help avert layoffs and the cutting of routes. The plan would provide an additional \$170 billion to K-12 schools, colleges, and universities to help them reopen and operate safely or to facilitate remote learning.

### **More money for child care and child tax credits**

The American Rescue Plan calls for creation of a \$25 billion emergency fund and an additional \$15 billion to an existing grant program to help child care providers, including family child care homes, to pay for rent, utilities, and payroll, and increased costs associated with the pandemic like personal protective

equipment. It also proposes expanding the child care tax credit for one year so that families will get back as much as half of their spending on child care for children under age 13.

### **A temporary increase of tax credits**

In a major victory for human needs advocates, Biden proposes boosting the Child Tax Credit to \$3,600 for children under age 6 and \$3,000 for those between ages 6 and 17 for a year. The credit would also be made fully refundable. And he proposes raising the maximum Earned Income Tax Credit for a year to close to \$1,500 for childless adults, increasing the income limit for the credit from its current \$16,000 to about \$21,000. While the fact sheet describing the plan only mentions eliminating the age cap for older workers to receive the EITC, it is expected that the proposal will also include covering younger adults (likely starting at age 19 rather than the current age of 25).

### **Restoration of emergency paid leave**

The American Rescue Plan would reinstate the paid sick and family leave benefits that expired at the end of December until September 30. It would extend the benefit to workers employed at businesses with more than 500 employees and less than 50, as well as federal workers who were excluded from the original program. Under Biden's proposal, people who are sick or quarantining, or caring for a child whose school is closed, would receive 14 weeks of paid leave. The government would reimburse employers with fewer than 500 workers for the full cost of providing the leave.

A group of 16 senators, evenly divided between the parties, and the co-chairs of the House Problem-Solvers caucus met over the weekend with National Economic Council Director Brian Deese to discuss the \$1.9 trillion package. Press reports indicated they questioned the \$1.9 trillion cost, and Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) said afterwards that she would seek the agreement of the bipartisan group to back a smaller package. There was general agreement on the need for more funding for vaccines. Senator Angus King (I-ME) expressed support for getting a COVID package through the Senate before the impeachment trial begins (scheduled for February 8). The participants expected to take part in the meeting were Senators Capito (R-WV), Cassidy (R-LA), Collins (R-ME), Moran (R-KS), Murkowski (R-AK), Portman (R-OH), Romney (R-UT), Young (R-IN), Durbin (D-IL), Hassan (D-NH), Hickenlooper (D-CO), Kelly (D-AZ), King (I-ME), Manchin (D-WV), Shaheen (D-NH), and Warner (D-VA), and House Problem-Solver chairs Gottheimer (D-NJ) and Reed (R-NY).

In addition to the proposals in the American Rescue Plan, President Biden also signed multiple executive actions and memoranda regarding his national coronavirus response plan and the economic crisis resulting from the pandemic. For more information on these, see the related article in this *Human Needs Report*.

[Return to Top](#)

### **Advocates Praise President Biden's Day One Immigration Bill**

On his first day in office, President Biden released details of his sweeping immigration reform bill, which he hopes to get passed through Congress. The U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021 would provide an earned path to citizenship for all 11 million undocumented individuals who were in the U.S. as of Jan. 1. According to the [Washington Post](#), the bill proposes an eight-year pathway for millions of immigrants, including temporary legal status for five years, followed by the ability to apply for a green card after five years if they pass background checks and pay their taxes, and eligibility to apply for citizenship three years later. The bill would expedite the process for beneficiaries of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program (also known as Dreamers) and the temporary protected status (TPS) program for migrants from strife-torn nations who, along with certain agricultural workers, could apply for a green card immediately.

According to the American Immigration Council, the bill will also make significant changes to the legal immigration system. It will bolster the number of employment- and family-based visas by recapturing millions of previously unused visas, increase per-country visa caps, and provide rapid paths to a green card for children and spouses of permanent residents. In addition, the proposal will expand refugee admission, provide funding to reduce asylum application backlogs, and include a focus on addressing the root causes of migration from Central America. For more information, see this [White House fact sheet](#).

The bill is expected to be introduced in the Senate in the coming weeks, championed by Sen. Bob Menendez (D-NJ). In a [statement](#), Sen. Menendez said of the bill, “This plan is not only about fixing our broken immigration system, but building a better one that reunites families, brings the undocumented community out of the shadows and on a path to citizenship, stands up for human rights, addresses root causes of migration, and includes a smart border security strategy.”

Greisa Martinez Rosas, executive director of United We Dream, [called](#) the legislation “the most progressive legalization bill in history.” Janet Murguía, president and CEO of UnidosUS (a member of CHN) said in a [statement](#), “In addition to providing long-overdue and immediate relief and certainty to DACA recipients, these innovative and common-sense plans lay the groundwork to build a more fair, inclusive, and effective immigration system that will make us a stronger country with a brighter future.”

In addition to the wide-sweeping immigration proposal, President Biden also signed multiple executive actions and memoranda regarding immigration. For more information on these, see the related article in this *Human Needs Report*.

[Return to Top](#)

## **President Biden Signs Dozens of Executive Actions Affecting Human Needs Priorities**

President Biden signed dozens of executive orders, memoranda, and directives on the first few days of his presidency. Some of the actions President Biden and his administration took related to human needs include:

- *COVID-19 pandemic:* establishing a 200-page [national response plan](#) to the pandemic; prioritizing protecting [worker](#) health and safety; making sure [schools](#) can reopen safely, including by reimbursing schools for eligible costs related to reopening; urging all Americans to wear masks for 100 days; mandating mask use on public transportation and federal property; reviving a global health unit in the National Security Council to oversee pandemic response; boosting production of PPE.
- *Economic security:* extending the federal [moratorium](#) on evictions and foreclosures through March; extending a freeze on federal student loan payments and interest through September; increasing the [Pandemic EBT](#) food assistance benefit by 15 percent to help struggling families provide food for their children during school closures; asking the USDA to extend the 15 percent increase in SNAP benefits; providing guidance to states to increase SNAP emergency benefits for those who need it most; restoring collective bargaining rights to federal employees; setting the stage to raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour for federal contractors; directing [FEMA](#) to pay 100% of the costs to move people experiencing homelessness and living in group shelters to hotels and motels through September.
- *Immigration:* repealing the [travel ban](#) on people from several primarily Muslim nations; preserving the [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals \(DACA\) program](#); halting [construction](#) on the border wall; revoking Trump's order that excluded undocumented immigrants from the 2020 [census](#) count and congressional apportionment; pausing deportations for certain noncitizens for 100 days.
- *Equity:* ordering the government to establish administration-wide policies to promote racial equity across the U.S.; pushing equity in vaccinations, access to PPE, and other COVID-19 responses; repealing the [ban](#) on transgender people from serving in the military. Biden is [expected](#) to sign additional orders addressing additional racial equity issues on Tuesday, Jan. 26.
- *Climate change:* rejoining the Paris climate accord, canceling the permit for the Keystone XL pipeline.

Additional actions on climate change, health care, immigration, equity, international affairs, national security and more are [expected](#) in the coming days and weeks.

[Return to Top](#)

### **Hearings Begin on President Biden's Cabinet Picks**

On Friday, Jan. 22, the Senate Finance Committee voted unanimously to send the confirmation of Janet Yellen, President Biden's nominee to be Treasury Secretary, to the full Senate. The Senate is expected to vote on the nomination on Monday, Jan. 25. Advocates can watch a recording of the Jan. 19 committee hearing [here](#). As the Treasury Secretary, Yellen would play a key role in guiding the nation's economic recovery. The Department of the Treasury also administers several housing and community development programs including the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program, the Making Home Affordable program, and Community Development Financial Institutions.

In her prepared [statement](#), Yellen said of President Biden’s proposed American Rescue Plan, “[T]he smartest thing we can do is act big. In the long run, I believe the benefits will far outweigh the costs, especially if we care about helping people who have been struggling for a very long time.... We have to rebuild our economy so that it creates more prosperity for more people and ensures that American workers can compete in an increasingly competitive global economy.” During the hearing, Yellen – who has been confirmed by the Senate five times previously for other positions, including chair of the Federal Reserve – voiced her support for President Biden’s \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief plan, including boosting the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour. “More must be done,” Yellen [told](#) the Senate Finance Committee during her confirmation hearing. “Without further action, we risk a longer, more painful recession now — and long-term scarring of the economy later.” Yellen is expected to receive swift bipartisan support from the Senate, making her the first female Treasury Secretary.

Hearings were also held last week in various Senate committees for President Biden’s picks for secretaries of the Departments of Homeland Security, State, Defense, and Transportation. All nominees to the cabinet must be confirmed by a simple majority of the Senate. The Senate has already confirmed the Director of National Intelligence and the Secretary of Defense.

[Return to Top](#)

### **The Senate Changes Hands**

With the election of Democratic Senators Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff in Georgia, there are 50 Democrats and 50 Republicans in the Senate. Vice President Kamala Harris presides, and by breaking the tie in favor of Democrats, Senator Chuck Schumer (D-NY) has become Majority Leader. However, negotiations between the parties have not yet led to the organizing agreement needed to establish committee participation. That means Republicans are still the chairs of Senate committees, and still have majorities in some committees until the agreement is finalized. Republicans want a commitment to retain the filibuster as the rules now require (60 votes are needed to end filibusters related to most legislation, including appropriations bills; nominations for executive appointments and judges can proceed with a simple majority). Many Democrats would like to get rid of the filibuster, but it would take every Democrat (plus the tie-breaking vote of Vice President Harris) to get rid of it, and at least Senator Manchin (D-WV) has announced opposition to doing so. Nevertheless, Majority Leader Schumer has rejected an up-front promise not to end the filibuster, so negotiations continue.

It would take 10 Republican senators vote for the American Rescue Plan proposed by President Biden (see article in this issue) to break a filibuster against that legislation, assuming all Democrats voted for it. If it appears that such bipartisan support will not be forthcoming, Democrats are considering utilizing budget process rules to be able to enact legislation similar to the Biden plan with only a simple majority in the Senate. This would require the House and Senate to agree on a narrowly drawn budget resolution with “reconciliation” instructions to various committees to come up with legislation that would advance provisions in the COVID rescue plan. Both the budget resolution and the reconciliation bills that emerge

only need a simple majority. There are constraints on what can be included using this approach, but Senate rules experts are exploring ways to use reconciliation to the fullest, intent on avoiding the logjam of a needed a 60-vote supermajority to overcome expected filibusters. For more information about how reconciliation works, see this recorded webinar: [\*\*Budget Strategy to Pass a COVID Bill in the Senate: Reconciliation 101.\*\*](#)

[Return to Top](#)

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