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April 10, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

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

As our country weathers the financial and public health crisis created by the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, human services agencies stand in solidarity with medical professionals, law enforcement, and other first responders to support the health and well-being of our communities. With a long road to recovery ahead of us, it is vitally important that we invest in the infrastructure needed to create economic opportunity in our communities, keep children safe and mitigate the trauma families are experiencing, ensure each of us has access to basic nutritional supports, and reinforce the ability of our child care system to provide quality care to families impacted by the pandemic.

We are writing today to highlight the actions needed by Congress to reinforce our human services system's ability to meet the urgent needs in our communities due to the COVID-19 public health emergency and its immediate aftermath. As a bipartisan, nonprofit membership organization representing state and local health and human services agencies, the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) has been working in lockstep with our state and local network to identify emerging needs and critical barriers in adapting to the unprecedented challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has created. Accordingly, we have developed a set of policy recommendations guided by three core principles; stabilizing our human services infrastructure with the people and resources needed to get through the current crisis; adjusting federal policies to reflect the realities of delivering essential human services during a pandemic; and responding to increased needs in the community as a result of the economic shocks felt throughout the country. Our policy recommendations are organized around strategies that support the essential human services workforce, bolster our human services infrastructure, and rapidly respond to community needs. Each set of recommendations cut across the array of human services policy areas, including child welfare, nutritional supports, child care, and economic assistance services.

The American Public Human Services Association advances the well-being of all people by influencing modern approaches to sound policy, building the capacity of public agencies to enable healthy families and communities, and connecting leaders to accelerate learning and generate practical solutions together.

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Sustaining the Essential Human Services Workforce

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a new set of challenges for human services workers and community providers that are critically needed to support the well-being of families and provide essential services and emergency assistance in communities. Risk of exposure to those infected with COVID-19, lack of access to child care, and alternative work environments have strained staff capacity at a time when there is rising need for services. Congress should take the following actions to sustain the human services workforce needed to meet the needs in our communities.

- ***Include Essential Human Services Workers in any First Responder Funding Packages*** – Any legislation that provides additional resources and/or prioritization to First Responders should include essential human services workers and community providers – including those in child welfare, adult protective services, disability services, and child care.
- ***Appropriate Hazard Pay to Front Line Workers*** – Congress should appropriate funding to states to provide hazard pay to front line human services workers whose jobs risk exposure to COVID-19 infection. This should include child welfare staff involved in child protection, prevention, foster care, and detention, as well as operating child care providers and adult protective services.
- ***Support Continuity of Child Welfare Services for Children and Families***– To support community providers at risk of closure due to the financial impacts of the pandemic, Congress should authorize additional emergency funds for Title IV-E and IV-B programs that can support locally-identified gaps and needs through targeted grantmaking.

Investing in Human Services Infrastructure

State and local human services agencies are being stretched to the brink as they respond to growing needs in communities. The financial strain from shortfalls to state and local budgets is exacerbated further by rapidly accelerating demand for essential services and significant investments in technology to maintain continuity of services and establish new COVID-19 response initiatives. Congressional action is needed to relieve financial pressures on human services agencies so they can continue to prioritize the urgent needs of children and families. Specifically, Congress should do the following:

- ***Increase Federal Match for Medicaid and Foster Care Payments*** – Increase the Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) up to at least 12% and extend the increase beyond the public health emergency to absorb increased demand for services during the economic recovery. Explicitly state the FMAP increase applies to Title IV-E Foster Care and Permanency Programs and phase out the increase gradually over time based on economic conditions.
- ***Increase SNAP Administrative Match Rate*** – Temporarily increase the federal reimbursement rate for allowable Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) administrative costs during the public health emergency as states respond to significant increases in applications and incur additional costs in information technology and Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) processing beyond normal circumstances.
- ***Leverage TANF to Support the Economic Recovery*** – Authorize funding through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program to reimburse states 80% of the cost of increased spending on non-recurrent short-term benefits, subsidized employment, and basic assistance to address economic needs during the recovery. In addition, Congress should provide a two-year extension for TANF so state efforts to support the economic well-being of families during the recovery are not jeopardized by the threat of short-term funding lapses.

- **Address Gaps in Meeting the Health and Safety of Children and Elderly** – The Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) provides a flexible mechanism for states to direct resources to meet targeted needs in the community, particularly among disabled and elderly adults susceptible to health implications from COVID-19. Increased funding for SSBG is a quick and efficient mechanism for states to address gaps in essential services.

Meeting the Needs of Our Community

The current public health emergency has created disparate impacts for many groups in our communities and revealed the need for targeted actions to address structural inequities exacerbated by the pandemic. Congress should take the following actions to empower human services agencies to provide nutritional and child welfare supports needed for all members of our communities to be healthy and thrive.

Nutrition Supports to Meet the Needs of Our Community

Policy Issue	Action Needed
Expand Access to P-EBT Food Benefits for School-Aged Children	The pandemic has revealed both the urgency and the challenges to meet the nutritional needs of children eligible for free and reduced price school meals during extended school closures. Congress should extend the Pandemic EBT program authorized in HR6201 through the Summer and encourage USDA to accept alternative benefit issuance methods when Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards are not feasible.
Provide Access to Food Benefits for Children Under Six	Congress should provide access to food benefits for children that would otherwise be receiving nutritional supports through child care centers participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) that are currently closed. This could be through increasing SNAP benefits for households with children under six, increased funding for WIC, or expanding P-EBT benefits to child care centers.
Clarify SNAP Waiver Authorities	Congress should clarify the waiver authorities vested with USDA during the public health emergency so that no families are subject to requirements that cannot be reasonably met during the pandemic. These include permitting states to waive employment and training requirements for eligible college students, extending universal expedited processing procedures to all households, and holding states harmless from quality control review requirements. These changes would both avoid creating undue hardships on families and allow states to focus their limited resources on getting benefits issued to those who need them.
Provide Authority for States to Purchase Point of Sale Devices for Small Retailers	Significant barriers remain in the short-term to increase the number of states and retailers that can provide online purchasing as a safe option for SNAP households. To help smaller retailers provide alternatives for SNAP recipients to in-store purchases and increase access to online ordering in areas with limited shopping options, Congress should exempt small retailers from the requirement to purchase their own wireless Point of Sale device and authorize a federal administrative match for such investments by states.

Child Welfare Supports to Meet the Needs of Our Community


Policy Issue	Action Needed
Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care	At a critical juncture in their lives, youth transitioning out of foster care need increased support both during the pandemic and the ensuing economic recovery. Congress should waive spending limits within the Title IV-E John H. Chafee program that limit investments in housing for youth transitioning out of foster care and waive work and education requirements for older youth in extended care.
Increase Resources for Kinship Caregivers	Grandparents and other kinship caregivers play a vital role in meeting the needs of children at risk of more costly and traumatic foster care placements. Congress should appropriate additional IV-E funds to allow states to increase assistance for kinship caregivers. Furthermore, kinship caregivers and other foster parents should be given priority access to child care to ensure they are able to continue to meet the needs of children while also working.
Support Children at-Risk of or in Foster Care	The COVID-19 pandemic is creating new challenges for child welfare agencies to maintain an adequate supply of safe placements for children at risk of or in foster care. For children currently in foster care, additional funding is needed for states to provide emergency assistance and increased payments for foster homes and programs serving children exposed to COVID-19 through Title IV-B. Congressional action is also needed to invest new resources and flexible funding to keep children and families safely together in their homes. This could be done through investments in primary prevention through CAPTA, the Family First Prevention Services Act, or child welfare flexible funding options included in the Presidential budget.
Temporarily Modify Background Check Requirements for Community Providers	While fingerprinting sites are closed during the pandemic, child welfare providers are unable to hire essential personnel and recruit new foster parents. Congress should temporarily modify background check requirements for child welfare programs during the public health emergency so that agencies can be responsive to child safety needs in the community.

State and local human services agencies are committed to supporting the health and well-being of all children and families. We strongly urge Congress to advance these policies and invest in the critical resources needed to stabilize our human services system and the families we serve. In the coming weeks, APHSA will be working with state and local agencies to identify the tools needed to build strong and resilient workforce, child care, and child welfare systems that support the long-term economic recovery of our country and leave us better prepared to persevere through future economic and public health crises. We will also assess the lasting impacts of the pandemic on new and developing initiatives, such as the Family First Prevention Services Act, and consider adaptations that will lead to better long-term outcomes. We look forward to a continued dialogue with Congress and stand as a resource and ally to advance the solutions needed to build healthy and thriving communities.

Please reach out to Matthew Lyons, Director of Policy and Research, at mlyons@aphsa.org with any questions and to discuss opportunities to work together in the coming weeks.

Sincerely,

Tracy Wareing Evans



President and CEO
American Public Human Services Association

Duke Storen



Chair, APHSA Leadership Council
Commissioner, Virginia Department of Social Services

cc:

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