



## Policy Brief

February 19, 2021



### Congress Moving Forward on \$1.9 Trillion Relief Package

On February 5<sup>th</sup>, the Senate [approved](#) using the [budget resolution](#) process to speed up President Biden's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 economic relief package, with the tiebreaking vote cast by Vice President Harris. This bill is expected to be signed into law without major changes, as it can be finalized without Republican support. Both parties have been able to pass some [amendments](#) to the package, including preventing the federal minimum wage from being raised to \$15 an hour. Although the bill currently does not contain any provider relief funds, experts are hopeful this could be added in. Below are the key [provisions](#) currently included in the relief package.

#### Key Coronavirus and Health Care Provisions

- Allocates \$160 billion to fight the coronavirus pandemic, which includes:
  - \$20 billion for a national vaccination program to ensure all people can receive free shots regardless of immigration status
  - \$50 billion toward expanding and improving testing
  - \$10 billion for manufacturing pandemic supplies domestically
  - \$30 billion for the Disaster Relief Fund to increase supplies and protective gear
- Extends the federal subsidies for the Affordable Care Act (ACA)'s Health Insurance Exchanges to ensure no one spends more than 8.5% of their income on health coverage

#### Key Provisions for Economic Relief

- Gives \$1,400 stimulus checks to individuals, excluding high earners (eligibility threshold to be determined)
- Funds an additional \$400 per week in unemployment insurance through August
- Directs \$170 billion to support school re-openings

- Provides \$440 billion for community aid
- Provides \$350 billion in emergency funding for state, local and territorial governments
- Expands paid sick, family and medical leave by 14 weeks for caregivers dealing with closed schools or care centers
- Provides an additional \$1,400 in leave benefits for eligible workers
- Extends eviction and foreclosure moratoriums through September
- Directs \$30 billion toward rental assistance and \$5 billion toward homelessness emergency assistance

### **What Comes Next?**

While the recent stimulus package was passed on partisan lines, Republicans have been able to prevent some [provisions](#) being added to the new legislation. This includes preventing stimulus checks from going to high earners (the income thresholds have yet to be determined). Congress is still ironing out the details of the stimulus package, but it is expected to be passed without any major changes.



### **Private Sector Efforts to Support COVID-19 Vaccination**

As the public health community continues to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, private companies have increased the attention being paid to marginalized and at-risk populations. [Racial and ethnic minorities](#), people living in poverty and those [experiencing homelessness](#) face increased difficulties in accessing COVID-19 vaccines. In many of these communities, misinformation about the safety and efficacy of these vaccines compounds these challenges. To protect public health, many private companies have begun launching their own efforts to improve access to COVID-19 vaccination.

#### **The private sector is trying to increase access for at-risk community members.**

At-risk communities face even greater chances of contracting COVID-19 and dying from related complications. While these communities are being prioritized by many states' distribution plans, barriers to access like a lack of transportation, difficulty with [scheduling technology](#) or unstable housing situations make it difficult to keep vaccination appointments. Here are a few [private-sector efforts](#) aimed at solving these problems:

- **Lack of Transportation for Inner-city Residents:** In Michigan, public and private transportation providers have begun offering ride vouchers to help people get to their vaccination appointments regardless of ability to pay. In D.C., Howard University and Wells Fargo have partnered to bring free testing to the inner city, with plans to expand this to vaccinations in the future.
- **Lack of Resources in Indigenous Communities:** Like many other tribes, the Navajo Nation faces some of the worst COVID-19 rates in the country. To help, hospitals, private companies within the community and the Nation have been distributing food to families still in quarantine, gathering vaccination-related supplies for clinicians and providing peer-to-peer financial support.
- **Lack of Access for People Experiencing Homelessness:** Community clinics in Maryland have launched [mobile clinics](#), aimed at bringing COVID-19 care and vaccinations to the homeless population. The CDC is [encouraging](#) community partners that run soup kitchens or other outreach programs for people facing housing insecurity to explore launching their own vaccination programs.

**Initiatives are also being launched to combat vaccine misinformation in these communities.**

In many vulnerable communities, distrust of the medical community after decades of [medical racism](#) also proves a barrier to access. [Incorrect information](#) about the safety and effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines undermines efforts for widespread vaccination. This misinformation is often spread via social media platforms, prompting private companies like [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) to launch anti-misinformation efforts, particularly around false vaccine claims. Both companies have announced plans to remove posts with false information about vaccines and flag these posts on subsidiary platforms that they also own (like Facebook’s recent-acquisition, Instagram).



**A Variety of COVID-19 Variants: What We Know So Far**

While widespread COVID-19 vaccination initiatives bring hope to communities, [variant mutations](#) of the disease pose the next great challenge for the health care sector. Today, [three variants](#) of the virus from the [United Kingdom](#), [South Africa](#) and [Brazil](#) have begun to spread across the U.S. While the vaccines are still effective against these mutations, the variants can be more easily

spread between people. For more on what we know so far, as well as what legislators, health care providers and the broader scientific community are doing to tackle the new COVID-19 variants, read more.

### **What do we know about the new COVID-19 viral mutations?**

Viruses constantly mutate, so new variations are always expected to emerge. [According to the CDC](#), all three variants of the original COVID-19 virus share a specific mutation that increases their infectiousness. Of the three, the U.K variant has been found the [most infectious](#) and is associated with an increased risk of death. It has already been reported in 27 states, with Florida and California having the highest rates.

### **How is the health care community rising to the challenge?**

States and health care providers have already begun working to better understand these new variants of COVID-19, partnering on [sequencing](#) COVID-19 lab results to find mutations. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention has scaled up its processing of samples, contracting with external labs to process thousands each week. The federal government is also providing support, increasing the amount of sequencing funding included in the latest COVID-19 relief package.

### **All currently-approved vaccines are still effective against these mutated forms of COVID-19.**

Vaccine researchers [continue to explore](#) improvements to further protect against future mutations. To support this work, the U.S. could consider increasing rates of COVID-19 case sequencing, since sequencing allows scientists to better understand these mutations. Currently, [less than 1%](#) of positive COVID-19 cases are being sequenced; in contrast, the U.K. is sequencing approximately 10% of cases.

## Updates to COVID-19 Regulations

AHPA continues to follow new COVID-19 regulations, guidance and other government actions. The updates below are the latest guidance and other developments since February 8<sup>th</sup> to help mitigate the impacts of COVID-19. For earlier COVID-19 regulations and guidance, visit the previous Policy Brief.

### **Biden Administration to Use DPA to Boost Production of COVID-19 Tests, Gloves, Vaccines**

- The Biden Administration [will use](#) the Defense Production Act (DPA) to boost supplies of Pfizer COVID-19 vaccines, ramp up the availability of at-home virus tests and increase production of gloves.

### **Community Health Centers Vaccination Program Announced**

- The White House has [announced](#) the launch of the Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) program to provide more vaccines to underserved, vulnerable communities. This will include at least one FQHC in each state, expanding to 250 centers in the coming weeks.

## COVID-19 Foreclosure Protections Extended for Homeowners

- The Biden Administration has [extended](#) the forbearance and foreclosure protections for homeowners grappling with the financial pressure of the pandemic. The foreclosure moratorium and mortgage payment forbearance enrollment window are extended through June 30, 2021.

## Biden Administration Voices Support for ACA to the Supreme Court

The Biden Administration recently sent a [letter](#) to the Supreme Court officially reversing the [Trump Administration's position](#) on the pending Affordable Care Act (ACA) [case](#). The letter states that the federal government believes in the constitutionality of the individual mandate and even if the Court disagrees, the rest of the ACA should stand or remain valid. The case was argued before the Supreme Court on November 10<sup>th</sup> and a decision is expected by July 2021. For further details on the case, click [here](#).

## Biden Administration Reverses Policy on Medicaid Work Requirements

Last Friday, the Biden Administration sent a letter to 10 states informing them of their intention to reverse the Trump Administration's policy allowing Medicaid work requirements. The work and community engagement requirements do "not promote the objectives of the Medicaid program," CMS wrote in the [letter](#) sent to Arkansas. States will now have 30 days to make the argument to CMS for keeping their work requirements before the Agency decides whether to officially withdraw them. The Supreme Court is set to [hear a case](#) challenging the legality of Arkansas' work requirements on March 29<sup>th</sup>.

## White House Reestablishes Office of Faith-Based and Community Partnerships

President Biden has released an Executive Order [reestablishing](#) the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships (the Partnerships Office, for short). This office will launch in mid-March, focusing on setting policy, priorities and objectives to improve partnerships between the federal government and faith-based (as well as other community-serving) organizations. The Partnerships Office will also inform community partners of new opportunities for engagement, both domestically and around the world. For more detail, read the full Executive Order [here](#).

## Latest Leadership Nominees for the Biden Administration

Although at a slower pace than previous administrations, the Biden Administration has begun selecting its top individuals to lead federal health-related agencies, provided the Senate confirms. Here's what we know so far:

Leadership Position	Nominee	Status
<i>Director</i> <b>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention</b>	<b>Dr. Rochelle Walensky</b>	<i>Finalized</i>
<i>Surgeon General</i>	<b>Dr. Vivek Murthy</b>	<i>Confirmation Still Needed</i>
<i>Secretary</i> <b>Health and Human Services</b>	<b>Xavier Becerra</b>	<i>Confirmation Still Needed</i>
<i>Assistant Secretary</i> <b>Health and Human Services</b>	<b>Dr. Rachel Leland Levine</b>	<i>Confirmation Still Needed</i>
<i>Administrator</i> <b>Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services</b>	<b>Chiquita Brooks-LaSure</b>	<i>Confirmation Still Needed</i>
<i>Director</i> <b>Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation</b>	<i>TBD</i>	<i>TBD</i>



A Look at the Federal Register

### Final Rule: Promoting Telehealth in Rural America

The FCC has released a [final rule](#) establishing that the Promoting Telehealth Report and Order (FCC 19-78) should be implemented as soon as possible to meet the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic. **The rule is effective March 15, 2021.**

## IN OTHER NEWS

[Hearing Date Set for Becerra Nomination for HHS Secretary](#) – Axios

[Meet me at the Virtual Water Cooler: The Race to Fix Virtual Meetings](#) – The NY Times

[COVID-19 Pandemic Has Hit People of Color the Hardest, Including Among People With Medicare](#) – Kaiser

[States Set Different COVID-19 Vaccination Priorities for People with High-Risk Conditions](#) – Kaiser

[White House Consults with Amazon and Other Big Tech Giants On Vaccine Roll Out](#) – Politico