How Biden's COVID-19 Relief Plan Will Help End the HIV Epidemic

Known as a $1.9 trillion relief bill for COVID-19, the plan will also impact those living with and vulnerable to HIV.

March 15, 2021 By AIDS United

On March 11, President Biden signed the American Rescue Plan. This plan provides major benefits including $1,400 in stimulus checks, the expansion of unemployment benefits through Sept. 6, 2021 and more than $20 billion in emergency rental assistance. While these items benefit many, our policy team walks us through the specifics of how this bill impacts people living with and vulnerable to HIV.

Increased public health funding

While no specific funding was included for HIV programs like Ryan White or Housing Opportunities for Persons With AIDS also known as HOPWA, the $350 billion in aid for state, local and tribal governments will go a long way toward supporting health departments that are struggling to find funding during the COVID-19 pandemic — and could help save HIV services. To this end, the bill also provides $7.66 billion to state, local and territorial public health departments to help sustain their public health workforce during COVID.

The American Rescue Plan includes $8.5 billion in aid to the Provider Relief Fund, which will help critical access hospitals, rural health clinics and community health centers provide health care in areas lacking resources. This includes parts of the United States like the South and Appalachia where there are higher rates of HIV transmission and less health care infrastructure.

Unprecedented support for harm reduction services

Within this massive, $1.9 trillion relief bill there was a smaller, but arguably no less significant line item. For the first time ever, Congress has approved federal funding specifically for syringe services programs and other harm reduction initiatives designed to help people who use drugs. While the $30 million in emergency funding for harm reduction programs included in the American Rescue Plan is certainly nowhere near enough to address the entirety of the scope of the problems facing people who use drugs in the U.S., it is a tremendous step forward.

It is AIDS United's hope that this $30 million in harm reduction focused funding is the start of a

new chapter in the United States' approach to the overdose crisis and to the health and well-being of people who use drugs.

For 50 years, the federal government has poured billions of dollars into a failed war on drugs whose punitive approach to substance use has only served to disproportionately incarcerate Black and Brown Americans. It has also led to the proliferation of a deeply unsafe drug supply that killed more than 81,000 people in the United States between May 2019 and May 2020.

Now, thanks to the tireless advocacy of harm reduction and drug user health advocates across the country, we may finally be at a turning point where federal dollars go to programs based on science, not stigma.

AIDS United's policy team will continue to monitor developments related to future COVID-19 stimulus packages.

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