After Months of Waiting, Senate Republicans Release Lackluster COVID-19 Relief Bill

Stable housing is vital for folks with HIV, and this bill does not include rent or mortgage freezes.

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On Thursday evening, July 30, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell adjourned the body for a long weekend as unemployment benefits for more than 30 million Americans expired due to Congressional inaction. Earlier in the week, Senate Republicans introduced The HEALS Act, a combination of eight bills that was a much-delayed response to the House Democrats' HEROES Act, passed by the House of Representatives several months ago.

While the coronavirus relief bill introduced by Senate Republicans does push for some items that will benefit the American public, it largely fails those at high risk for COVID-19 and the more than 30 million Americans who have been depending on the weekly $600 unemployment payments included in previous COVID-19 relief legislation. This is even as the United States gross domestic product has shrunk by 32.9% in the second quarter of 2020, the worst such period ever. Neither the Great Depression, Great Recession nor any other economic slump in the past two centuries has caused such a great slump in the economy.

While the Senate Republicans' bill would provide another one-time $1,200 stimulus check in the pockets of all Americans under a certain income threshold, one of the large missteps of their aid bill is in regards to unemployment. Rather than continue unemployment benefits at their current $600 per week, the aid bill introduced by Senate Republicans would cut federal unemployment benefits down to $200 per week. In addition to this cut, the Senate Republicans's legislation would also only extend the unemployment benefit until September — after which, the amount provide would be determined on a state-by-state basis. This would force states to decide to move from providing 70% of an individual's income or allowing states to continue a $200 flat rate. This would likely depend on the capacity of each state's unemployment system as well as a state's ability to fund the 70% previous salary.

Additionally, the aid bill introduced by Senate Republicans does not include rent or mortgage freezes. Across the United States, many areas are already seeing the beginnings of a tidal wave of evictions. Housing security is crucial for the safety and well-being of everyone — especially people living with HIV — when not in a pandemic, but it becomes even more crucial in times where social

distancing necessary. To not provide for housing in a coronavirus relief bill is a massive mistake on the part of Senate Republicans and could prove to be harmful in the fight to end the HIV epidemic. Housing is a key factor in HIV treatment access and prevention. Those living with and vulnerable to HIV are less likely to be able to seek treatment or keep up with treatment if they are exposed to housing instability.

Within this bill, there is a five year limited liability shield that would protect businesses, schools, universities and hospitals from COVID-19-related lawsuits. Even more concerning is expansion of this liability shield on civil rights legal provisions. This means that suing businesses for discrimination related to COVID-19 would be prohibited by the aid bill introduced by Senate Republicans. While this portion of the aid bill would require that these organizations to not act negligently and must operate within public health guidelines, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell considers this portion of the bill to be essential and would not consider bringing a vote to the floor without liability protection.

One of the few benefits the aid bill introduced by Senate Republicans would provide is the approval of telehealth visits for Medicaid. Also a component of the aid bill passed in the House of Representatives, this provision would allow for increased access to much needed health services. This move increases access to care for those who may be at high risk for COVID-19 or for those who have loved ones who are at high risk for COVID-19.

The HEROES Act, not the aid bill introduced by Senate Republicans, should be the floor and not the ceiling for assisting Americans. The coronavirus relief bill introduced by Senate Republicans woefully underestimates the needs of those living in the United States in what will likely become their greatest hours of need.

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