

Federal Funding Is Essential To Saving Alaska's Public Services

By Ryan Zamarripa July 10, 2020

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For a full list of sources, please see "Federal Funding Is Essential To Saving State and Local Public Services: State-by-State Fact Sheets," available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=487191>.

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting recession are wreaking havoc on Alaska; the state is facing a massive revenue shortfall, which will significantly affect its budget and ability to provide crucial services. Federal funding is needed to help Alaska, along with the local governments within the state, ensure that health care, education, transportation, first responders, and other services continue uninterrupted. The picture is already bleak: Since the pandemic started, the state has lost 8,300 public sector jobs. The economic gravity of the shortfall cannot be stressed enough. Without further federal aid to state and local governments, Alaska is projected to lose 16,500 private and public jobs by the end of 2021. The recent resurgence of the virus only compounds the urgency and should dispel all complacency.

The coronavirus pandemic has decimated Alaska's economy.

- In May, Alaska had an unemployment rate of 12.6 percent, one of the highest rates ever recorded, with roughly 20,000 more state residents out of work than in February.
- As of early July, approximately 140,000 Alaskans, representing 40.5 percent of the state's February labor force, have filed unemployment insurance claims since the beginning of March. Some estimates are projecting a double-digit unemployment rate well into 2021.

Alaska's tax revenues are plummeting, creating a severe funding crisis for schools, health care, and other critical services. The Alaska state government has projected a budget shortfall of \$612 million in FY 2020 and \$882 million in FY 2021, representing declines of 11 percent and 15 percent, respectively.

Cities in Alaska are facing serious revenue shortfalls as well. Juneau alone has recently projected a budget shortfall of \$34.5 million, according to [local sources](#). The National League of Cities estimates that cities will experience [\\$360 billion](#) in revenue loss through FY 2022, which will force them to significantly cut spending on crucial services or raise taxes on already recession-battered residents. [Studies](#) on the Great Recession have found that forcing states to deal with severe budget constraints through austerity dampen long-term gross domestic product (GDP), prolong spells of high unemployment, and extend recessions.

Between February and May, [8,300](#) public sector workers were laid off in Alaska.

- The National Education Association has estimated that by the end of FY 2022, Alaska could lose roughly [3,900](#) education jobs as a result of the decline in the state general revenues that fund education.

These job losses could get much worse. A recent analysis conducted by the Economic Policy Institute estimates that without federal action, Alaska will lose a combined total of [16,500](#) public and private jobs by the end of 2021.

Health care in Alaska is also in jeopardy. The Urban Institute has projected that Medicaid caseloads could increase by as much as [29,000](#), or 14.2 percent, through FY 2021—a massive and unprecedented spike. Alaska desperately needs help to cover those who are newly unemployed and expected to enroll in Medicaid and to offset extra Medicaid costs related to COVID-19. Without proper funding, the state will be unable to treat at-risk patients, keep families healthy, or provide lifesaving care. Funding Medicaid is critical to ensuring that Alaska can respond effectively to the coronavirus public health crisis and the current economic recession.

The **Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act**, which passed the U.S. House of Representatives on May 15 with bipartisan support, includes provisions that would help Alaska avoid additional layoffs and devastating cuts to services.

Specifically, it would:

- Allocate [\\$2.8 billion](#) to the government of Alaska and [\\$650 million](#) to its localities over a span of two years, saving thousands of jobs and helping to maintain the uninterrupted delivery of public services such as health care, first responders, and safe drinking water.
- Increase Alaska's Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) and provide an additional [\\$380 million](#) in Medicaid dollars to Alaska over an 18-month period.
- Provide [\\$197 million](#) for education in Alaska, including [\\$128 million](#) for public K-12 schools and [\\$59 million](#) to public colleges and universities, which would save an estimated [1,100](#) jobs supporting K-12 education and [300](#) supporting higher education. This funding would help strengthen distance learning and teaching strategies to keep students and teachers healthy.

Conclusion

As the recession stretches into the second half of 2020, it is becoming increasingly clear that states and localities are at the forefront of combating the pandemic and its economic fallout. From keeping students enrolled in remote learning programs to equipping community health centers with the protective gear needed to safely treat COVID-19 patients, state and local involvement can be seen and felt everywhere.

It is likely that both the coronavirus pandemic and the recession it led to are far from over. To help ease the financial pressures that states and localities are currently facing, it is imperative that the federal government pass legislation to:

1. Allocate at least \$915 billion in direct grants to states, localities, tribes, and territories.
2. Increase the Medicaid FMAP by at least 14 percentage points until June 30, 2021.
3. Provide at least \$90 billion to the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund to support both public schools and public colleges and universities.

Congress must act to get states and localities the aid they desperately need. Alaska and its residents can't afford to wait.

Ryan Zamarripa is the associate director of Economic Policy at the Center for American Progress.