



# West Virginia Needs the American Rescue Plan

## Provisions Will Provide Targeted Relief to Struggling Families

By Ryan Zamarripa and Lily Roberts | February 26, 2021

West Virginia's economy is still reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant economic recession. More than a year has passed since the first coronavirus case was detected in the United States, and thousands of Americans are still dying from the virus each week. Small businesses are shuttering permanently, and workers are filing for unemployment insurance (UI) in droves or leaving the workforce altogether. Congress and President Joe Biden must act boldly—or things will continue to get worse. The country needs to defeat the virus and help struggling West Virginia families.

As of December 2020:

- Some 43,000 fewer West Virginians were employed than in February 2020—an employment deficit of 6 percent.<sup>1</sup> Employment is down even more for low-wage workers; employment dropped 13 percent for West Virginians who earn less than \$27,000.<sup>2</sup>
- The number of state and local government employees in West Virginia is down by 8,900 from February 2020.<sup>3</sup> To endure the pandemic, West Virginia needs state and local employees for contact tracing, vaccination, unemployment agency staffing, support for children returning to in-person school, and other pandemic-related needs. Laying off these workers will only prolong both the pandemic and recession.

Emergency paid sick leave provisions expired at the end of 2020, meaning that West Virginians must make the choice between staying home to protect their families or co-workers and keeping their wages.

[Economic conditions in West Virginia are starting to regress](#)

- Claims for traditional UI showed that 2,900 West Virginians submitted new applications during the week ending January 23—160 percent higher than the state's average number of weekly claims in 2019.<sup>4</sup>

- At the end of January, the total number of West Virginians receiving traditional UI payments stood at 22,000, which has grown over the fall.<sup>5</sup> Week-to-week enrollment numbers have been volatile due to the growing number of COVID-19 cases in West Virginia and the challenges the UI system had in restarting benefits after Congress' delays in signing unemployment benefit extensions in December.
- 260,000 West Virginians still enrolled in Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) and Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC)—two programs that respectively make UI available to the self-employed, independent contractors, and part-time workers and extend the duration that an unemployed worker is eligible for assistance—are at risk of financial ruin if benefits are allowed to expire.<sup>6</sup>

### West Virginia needs Congress to pass bold stimulus

Without further federal aid to tide over working-class families until widespread vaccination allows for more normal economic activity, it is almost certain that West Virginia's economy will contract again, leading to needless suffering and hardship for hundreds of thousands of West Virginians. To ensure minimal disruption to West Virginia's economy, Congress and President Biden should immediately pass into law the following common-sense policies.

- **Allocate \$1.3 billion to the state of West Virginia and \$840 million to the local government entities within it.**<sup>7</sup> Previous relief proposals would have provided funding to cover the revenue shortfalls that West Virginia and many cities and counties within it are facing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. State aid was excluded from the relief bill that Congress passed in December, and further inaction will force state and local governments to cut services and lay off employees in public health and education.
- **Provide \$802 million for schools in West Virginia to safely reopen.**<sup>8</sup> Additional support is needed to repair ventilation systems, reduce class sizes, purchase personal protective equipment, hire support staff, and ensure that the most vulnerable children do not fall behind their peers. Safely reopening schools will also allow those who dropped out of the labor force due to caretaking needs to reenter.
- **Extend federal unemployment benefits through 2021.** 260,000 West Virginians are at risk of losing unemployment benefits when PUA and PEUC expire, which would harm vulnerable families struggling to make ends meet and cut off the crucial consumer spending that supports West Virginia businesses.<sup>9</sup> Supplemental weekly payments of \$400 are critical to keeping the state's consumer economy afloat.
- **Increase the child tax credit to \$3,000 per child, provide an additional \$600 per child under the age of 6, make it fully refundable, and extend the maximum qualifying age to 17 to assist the caretakers of the 160,000 eligible children in West Virginia.**<sup>10</sup> An expansion of this magnitude would provide an additional \$398 million to the poorest 60 percent of West Virginians.<sup>11</sup>

- **Enhance financial assistance for health coverage through the Affordable Care Act.** Even before the pandemic-induced recession, the United States' uninsured rate had been creeping up. As such, increasing marketplace premium subsidies available to the 17,000 West Virginians who already receive financial assistance—and expanding assistance to thousands more low-income and middle-class families—would help ensure West Virginians have access to health care and improve their financial security.<sup>12</sup>
- **Raise the federal minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$15 over five years.** A \$15 minimum wage would not only give 260,000 West Virginians—36 percent of the state's workforce—a raise, but it would also provide an extra \$801 million in total state wages and even more in economic activity.<sup>13</sup> An increase to the minimum wage would also decrease the amount of federal, state, and local dollars spent on supportive programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).
- **Extend the federal moratoria on evictions and foreclosures.** 490,000 West Virginians—37 percent of adults in the state—have fallen behind on basic household expenses, and protection from eviction and foreclosure would prevent widespread financial crisis.<sup>14</sup> It would also extend aid to renters and small landlords and help secure housing for the 48,000 West Virginians who are at risk of homelessness.<sup>15</sup>
- **Provide another round of direct checks.** The first round of direct checks reached 960,000 West Virginians as of June 2020 and provided \$1.6 billion in spending power to the state.<sup>16</sup> Additional \$1,400 checks would provide \$1.2 billion to the poorest 60 percent of West Virginians, a group whose average annual income is just \$26,300.<sup>17</sup>

With the labor market contracting in December 2020 and a dismal jobs report in January, it is clear that as the recession stretches into 2021, more aid will be needed.<sup>18</sup> Congress and President Biden must work quickly to ensure that working-class families across the country are able to make ends meet as the vaccination process continues. Failing to do so would be catastrophic for working-class families in West Virginia.

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## Endnotes

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- 12 Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, "2020 Marketplace Open Enrollment Period Public Use Files," available at <https://www.cms.gov/Research-Statistics-Data-and-Systems/Statistics-Trends-and-Reports/Marketplace-Products/2020-Marketplace-Open-Enrollment-Period-Public-Use-Files> (last accessed February 2021).
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- 16 Internal Revenue Service, "IRS Statement on Economic Impact Payments by state," June 26, 2020, available at <https://www.irs.gov/newsroom/irs-statement-on-economic-impact-payments-by-state>.
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