

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

March 24, 2021

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Governor
Office of Governor
400 S. Monroe Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399

Dear Governor DeSantis,

Thank you for releasing your recommendations for the proposed spending budget for the federal funding the great State of Florida will receive under the “American Rescue Plan Act of 2021.” As you know, the Act included \$195.3 billion for “Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds.” These federal funds were allocated to help states, counties, cities, and tribal governments cover the increased expenditures, replenish lost revenue, and mitigate economic harm from the coronavirus pandemic.

After reviewing the proposed budget, we are concerned with some aspects. First, we agree that we should be supporting the first responders in our state who have played an active role in combating this public health crisis with a one-time \$1,000 direct payment. However, this budget is leaving out a number of critical front-line workers, such as doctors, nurses, emergency room workers, public health department workers, sanitation and janitorial staff, grocery store staff, and agriculture and transportation workers who have been actively fighting and working during the pandemic for the last year. These workers have been an essential part of an effective response, often working long hours with increased exposure to the virus, and limited resources to complete their job. Excluding these employees trivializes the commitment and hard work they have provided the State of Florida.

In addition, these critical federal dollars are not a blank check to be spent anywhere. The “American Rescue Plan Act of 2021” was passed to address the critical needs of the American people. Therefore, we believe that some portion of this funding should be used to assist Floridians who are struggling to pay their rent, mortgages, and utilities. According to a WUWF article, 90,000 Floridians had their utilities disconnected in January of this year alone.¹ Many families and seniors are struggling due to the economic down slide caused by the pandemic and are months behind on their payments. Even when the moratoriums on utilities disconnection and evictions end, these residents will still be behind on their payments with very little hopes of catching up.

We also ask that these funds be used to deliver meaningful relief to Floridians, businesses, and protect state’s fiscal health. At the beginning of the pandemic, according to an executive summary

¹ Gaffney, R. (2021, March 16). *Lawmakers Look To Provide Relief For Floridians Struggling To Pay Their Utility Bill* . Retrieved from WUWF: <https://www.wuwf.org/post/lawmakers-look-provide-relief-floridians-struggling-pay-their-utility-bill#stream/0>

report, Florida was expected to have a budget shortfall because of increased Medicaid enrollment and additional unemployment claims. Since, Florida's fiscal outlook has improved we request that you expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act (ACA). As you know, the ACA Medicaid expansion was designed to address historically high uninsured rates among low-income adults. Florida is one of only 12 states that has yet to expand their program.² Under Medicaid expansion Florida would make significant "fiscal gains" by replacing state spending with expansion funds. Given that Florida will be able to balance the state budget at the end of this legislative session, we believe expanding Medicaid not only makes sense from an economic perspective, but from a humanity perspective. More than 850,000 Floridians could gain health insurance coverage during this public health crisis with this expansion.³

Finally, we appreciate your commitment to fixing Florida's terrible unemployment website, but as you are electing to use federal funding for the project, we request that these solutions actually resolve the technological inadequacies. The problems that plague Florida's unemployment website are not new. Between 2015 and 2019, 11% of jobless people in Florida received their benefits.⁴ With this federal funding, we no longer want these low unemployment claim numbers to be blamed on the website inadequacies. In addition, with the upgrades, we believe the people of Florida must continue to have the ability to file paper applications without difficulties or fear that it will be lost. This is because many residents of Florida, including many seniors, rural Floridians, and low-income residents, struggle to access computers or high-speed internet. Removing resident's ability to submit paper applications would create a huge barrier for those who are technologically challenged and those with limited English proficiency.

As we grapple with the challenges of mitigating the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, we do not believe that any leftover federal funding should be sent back to the federal government as suggested by my colleague, Senator Rick Scott. We believe that there are many avenues in which these federal dollars can be used to provide meaningful relief to families and business that have been struggling throughout this pandemic. Therefore, we appreciate your full and fair consideration of this letter and our offices stand prepared to assist you in any way necessary.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Al Lawson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end of the last name.

Al Lawson
Member of Congress

² Garfield, R., Orgera, K., & Damico, A. (2021, January 21). *The Coverage Gap: Uninsured Poor Adults in States that Do Not Expand Medicaid*. Retrieved from Kaiser Family Foundation: <https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/the-coverage-gap-uninsured-poor-adults-in-states-that-do-not-expand-medicaid/>

³ Childers, M. (2020, February). *Florida's Medicaid Expansion Opportunity*. Retrieved from Florida Health Justice Project: <https://www.floridahealthjustice.org/floridas-medicaid-expansion-opportunity.htm>

⁴ Rhodes, W. (2021, March 17). *The Palm Beach Post*. Retrieved March 17, 2021, from <https://www.palmbeachpost.com/story/news/politics/state/2021/03/17/bill-speed-up-floridas-unemployment-portal-moves-forward/4717785001/>

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