

POLITICO: Democrats seek hazard pay for health workers amid pandemic

Category: Covid-19

written by NCUIH | April 9, 2020

Democrats seek hazard pay for health workers amid pandemic

By Tucker Doherty, Rachel Roubein

04/08/2020 08:14 PM EDT

Congressional Democrats are trying to add \$13 per hour hazard payments for frontline health care workers up to a total of \$25,000 in the next coronavirus relief package, along with \$15,000 incentives for people who join the medical workforce surge during the pandemic.

Senate Minority Leader [Chuck Schumer](#) said a so-called Heroes Fund could compensate nurses, EMTs and other workers for unanticipated risks as they confront a flood of new cases. Some workers have unsuccessfully sought payments from cash-strapped hospitals and other employers experiencing a downturn in business from lockdowns and cancelations of nonessential procedures.

"No proposal will be complete without addressing the needs of our essential workers by giving them hazard pay," Schumer said on a call this week with reporters.

But no Republican has [signed on to the plan](#), an indication that bipartisan buy-in might be elusive as congressional Republicans [race to send billions of dollars more to small businesses](#) hit hard by the crisis. The White House didn't comment for this story, and Senate Majority Leader [Mitch McConnell](#)'s office didn't respond to a request for comment.

The proposed hazard payments would be limited for health professionals earning above \$200,000, but even workers above the cutoff could receive up to \$5,000. Schumer also proposed extending the payments to workers in other industries, including grocery store workers, truck drivers, drug store workers and pharmacists.

Some doctors and nurses have described staying in hotels to ensure they don't inadvertently pass the virus to their families. Others have said they fear they'll get infected, in part because of a severe shortage of specialized protective equipment.

"If you're putting your life and your health on the line, or you come home to your family and you're risking their health, that seems to me like something that should be compensated for," said a resident physician from Cleveland, who asked to remain anonymous because he wasn't authorized to speak to the press.

The recently passed CARES Act, [H.R. 748 \(116\)](#), allows patients to get tested for coronavirus without out-of-pocket costs in most cases, but sick workers could be left with thousands of dollars in medical bills for subsequent treatment. According to the Kaiser Family Health Foundation, an average hospital admission for pneumonia with major complications costs more than \$20,000 in total, including \$1,300 in out-of-pocket costs.

Some doctors have also expressed frustration that they are ineligible for the law's \$1,200 stimulus checks, which are reduced for workers with incomes above \$75,000. The labor market analytics firm

Emsi found 41 percent of health practitioners are eligible for the full amount, compared to 83 percent of the labor market overall. In New York, a high wage state that has become the epicenter of the crisis, just 29 percent of health practitioners are fully eligible.

Democratic lawmakers and labor unions have pushed in the last week for hazard pay for health personnel and other essential workers. At an SEIU press event, Sen. [Bob Casey](#) (D-Pa.) called for legislation that would treat health workers as “soldiers coming off the battlefield.”

President Donald Trump floated the idea of hazard pay during an appearance of Fox News last week and said his administration was asking hospitals to consider bonuses for their front-line workers. But the \$2.2 trillion stimulus bill’s hospital bailout fund is likely going to other needs. Hospitals say they’re desperate for more cash, as they work to buy much-needed equipment and grapple with revenue they’re losing from canceling elective surgeries.

Congress gave HHS wide latitude to determine how to divvy up those funds — and announced the first, [\\$30 billion tranche](#), based on how providers bill Medicare, would go out to hospitals within days. The next batch will focus on health providers who get very few Medicare dollars, such as nursing homes, pediatricians and children’s hospitals.

Vice President Mike [Pence has touted](#) the announcement of a “special pandemic pay program” for the 40,000 employees of HCA Healthcare, one of the country’s largest hospital chains. But the company’s program is focused on maintaining pay for furloughed and quarantined employees.

Labor leaders say they’ve pushed for hazard pay alongside other worker priorities, such as adequate protective equipment. But with traditional revenues in collapse and costs increasing, they say even those employers receptive to the idea haven’t offered much.

“We’re attempting to get, in nursing homes in particular, time-and-a-half pay,” said Rob Baril, an SEIU regional president, “but ultimately, if there’s not additional federal or state money that comes down, it becomes very difficult for employers to meet those needs.”

Baril said essential workers were also being asked to make other sacrifices, such as quitting part-time jobs they rely on to make ends meet. A [CDC report](#) on the initial wave of deaths in Washington state nursing homes in March identified shared staff as a major cause of the spread between facilities. In response, some local health departments have banned the practice.

Some hospital operators and physician staffing firms have responded to funding shortfalls by cutting pay, benefits and hours. Envision Healthcare, a major private equity-backed provider scrutinized by Congress last year over surprise billing, is [withholding pay and cutting salaries](#). Alteon Health, a major ER staffing firm, rolled back announced cuts to vacation and retirement benefits following [critical media coverage](#).