

June 22, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
U.S. Senate Majority Leader  
317 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives  
1236 Longworth H.O.B.  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer  
U.S. Senate Minority Leader  
322 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
U.S. House of Representatives Minority Leader  
2468 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Leaders McConnell, Schumer, Pelosi, and McCarthy,

We write today on behalf of the 50 million Americans who have been disproportionately affected by the Coronavirus and its economic consequences. It is critical that our needs, both the short- and long-term, be addressed in managing this crisis.

The vast majority of those who have been diagnosed with and are dying from the Coronavirus are individuals with disabilities. And in early May, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Jobs Report showed that nearly 1 million working-age people with disabilities lost their jobs – a 20 percent reduction – in March and April alone. By comparison, 14 percent of working-age people without disabilities lost their jobs in that timeframe.

The organizations we represent and our constituents demand a voice in the conversation about recovery. While we have seen a positive impact from the several legislative packages that Congress has passed, individuals with disabilities, their families, and those that support them have largely had their priorities excluded from final packages. As former government officials, we see both a moral and political imperative to support this community.

We respectfully request that the following provisions be included in future COVID-19 response packages.

**Increased funding for states for home and community-based services (HCBS)**

In the near term, one of our primary needs is increased funding for HCBS. As you know, a variety of health and human services needs are provided to individuals with disabilities through HCBS. We support the leadership of Senator Casey and Rep. Dingell in introducing the Coronavirus Relief for Seniors and People with Disabilities Act (S. 3544/ H.R. 6305), which provides additional funding for HCBS during this crisis.

People with underlying conditions, including hypertension and diabetes, regardless of if they are receiving care through a current HCBS Medicaid waiver, need these supports to ensure that they receive the care they need throughout this time. While we are supportive of and appreciate increases in the federal medical assistance percentages (FMAP), we understand that this funding is not flowing directly to individuals with disabilities as states deal with broader COVID-19 concerns. Additionally, as states look to cut funding for programs in dealing with their own budget deficits as a result of this

virus, HCBS may be among the first to go. Because of this, increased federal funding to states specifically for HCBS is essential.

HCBS funding is important for not just health care needs, but for individuals with disabilities to work. For example, HCBS funding could be used for direct support staff, including job coaches, so that individuals with disabilities who can work at this time have the supports they need to do so safely and effectively. It could be used for job developers to help individuals with disabilities understand their options and regain meaningful employment if they have been unfortunately laid off. It could also be used for assistive technologies in order to facilitate virtual work as needed.

Funding for HCBS will ensure that people with disabilities who can work get back on the job quickly as part of our country's overall recovery efforts and ensure an individual's person-centered service plan continues to be fully implemented.

### **Vocational rehabilitation (VR) service supports for states**

As we look to recover from the economic consequences of this crisis, we need to ensure that there are on ramps for individuals with disabilities to return to work. VR's purpose is to help individuals with disabilities achieve their vocational goals through targeted, individualized plans. VR service supports could be used for employment specialists that guide individuals with disabilities to apprenticeships or internships in regaining work, help them apply for meaningful employment, and allow them to be successful in their work as they return.

The long-term economic impact of COVID-19 on people of working age is significant, with the Federal Reserve predicting that the unemployment rate will remain elevated, coming in at 5.5% at the end of 2022 and only falling to 4.1% in the long term. In order for our economy to resurge in the aftermath of this pandemic, we need people to return to work when it is safe for them to do so. Unfortunately, studies show that individuals with disabilities are the last hired, and we fear that they will be the last to be re-hired.

Specifically, we ask that the federal match for VR be waived for two years. This will help to ensure that individuals with disabilities, including those who have become suddenly disabled because of COVID-19, will be able to access VR services. VR supports will ensure that individuals with disabilities have the support they need to overcome these barriers and gain meaningful employment.

### **Funding for businesses and nonprofits through the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP)**

While support specifically targeted for individuals with disabilities is essential, so is funding for businesses and nonprofits that employ and support individuals with disabilities. Programs like PPP have allowed businesses who employ individuals with disabilities to keep them on their payroll during this crisis and has allowed nonprofits that support individuals with disabilities during this time to continue to do so.

Unfortunately, receiving funding through the PPP does have some challenges that limits those who can receive funding, therefore negatively affecting individuals with disabilities. We appreciate that Congress extended the timeframe required to spend the PPP funding and still be able to have the funding repaid.

We also recommend that any type of nonprofit and nonprofits of any size be allowed to access such funding. By their very nature, nonprofits do not have extra profit that can be used to retain employees when they face revenue losses. Additionally, many have had to purchase large quantities of personal protective equipment (PPE) and spend other funding to keep their employees safe while they continue their essential work. PPE needs to be replaced often and will continue to be required for the foreseeable future, causing unforeseen costs to nonprofits of any size. Expanding the eligibility of the PPP will help businesses and nonprofits that support individuals with disabilities to be able to continue doing so.

Thirty years ago, the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law, giving people with disabilities their hard-fought civil rights – the first comprehensive law addressing the needs of people with disabilities. President George H.W. Bush once confided it was among his proudest achievements.

As we consider the enormous implications of COVID-19 on our society, we know there will be a rolling back of the gains we have seen since the ADA became law, particularly as it deals with employment for individuals with disabilities. However, through funding for HCBS, support through VR, and expansion of the PPP, we see opportunities for individuals with disabilities to overcome this crisis.

We are grateful for Congress's continued work to overcome this pandemic. It is essential that you support the needs of individuals with disabilities throughout this time. Thank you, and we look forward to partnering with you to ensure everyone has the opportunity to succeed in the aftermath of this crisis.

Sincerely,

Governor Tom Ridge

Senator Bob Dole

Senator Tom Harkin

Congressman Tony Coelho