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Schools, Transit, Hospital Funding Included in Senate Coronavirus Bill.

Senate leaders agreed on a package that includes $340 billion for relief efforts boosting schools, hospitals and state and local governments, as well as a $150 billion fund specifically to help states and localities fight the pandemic.

The Senate's historic $2 trillion relief package to address fallout from the coronavirus outbreak would provide billions to assist local and state governments with both their escalating economic challenges and efforts to respond to the disease.

A summary detailing new expenditures as authorized by the Appropriations Committee shows the measure includes $340 billion for relief efforts targeting schools, hospitals and state and local governments. The package includes expansion of all kinds of aid administered at the state and local level, from heating assistance to food stamps, as well as funding to bolster deserted transit systems and airports.

The measure also include $150 billion to help compensate states and localities for the money they are spending to respond to and attempt to contain the pandemic.

After days of sometimes barbed exchanges between Republicans and Democrats on priorities for the package—the third one Congress has worked on in response to the the coronavirus—the Senate approved the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act in a unanimous 96-0 vote. The sprawling legislation agreed to by senators and the White House would send $1,200 direct payments to many Americans, as well as provide funding for loans for both small and large businesses and aid to people who've been forced out of work by coronavirus shutdowns.

However, disagreements over one provision in the bill emerged Wednesday as a small group of Republican lawmakers said they were concerned that a benefit included in the package giving unemployed people a $600 weekly supplement for four months could incentivize them to not return to the workforce. The $600 benefit paid by the federal government would be in addition to the variable weekly benefits paid by states.

Eventually, the lawmakers offered an amendment to change the benefit, which failed. After the Senate's approval, the bill now heads to the House.

Included in the appropriations portion of the bill is a $30 billion Education Stabilization Fund for states, school districts and colleges and universities. The fund would help schools develop and implement plans to provide online learning for students, which is something many school systems across the country are trying to implement as schools close to prevent the spread of the virus.

About $13.5 billion of the money for schools would be awarded through formula grants to local school districts. The money could be used for basics like cleaning supplies, as well as educational technology like hardware, software and connectivity devices to aid students. Another $3 billion would be provided to states and could be used at governors' discretion to fund local education

agencies that have been most significantly impacted by the outbreak.

The National Education Association and other groups wrote to lawmakers this week asking them to bolster funding for hotspots, connection devices and mobile wireless service that they said would aid students who lack access to the internet and are unable to connect to virtual classrooms.

“We urge Congress to include in the final bill the robust remote and distance learning provisions found in the House’s version of this bill and ensure that all students can continue their education online for the duration of this national emergency,” the groups wrote.

The measure also includes $100 billion in grant funding for hospitals and other public health providers that could be used to cover lost revenues and unreimbursed healthcare related expenses related to the coronavirus outbreak.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention would also provide $4.3 billion in support for federal, state, and local public health agencies that could be used to prepare for and respond to the pandemic. Money could be used to purchase personal protective equipment, virus surveillance, laboratory testing, and to pay for personnel to conduct contact tracing to identify how the virus is being spread.

Transit services, which have seen ridership plummet as businesses have shut down and Americans have been ordered to stay home, would also see a boost. The bill includes $25 billion that would be distributed via formula grants.

“$25 billion will help alleviate the worst of the crisis in the short term but we also don’t know how long the crisis is going to go on,” said Steve Davis, a spokesman for Transportation for America.

A report out this week from TransitCenter estimates transit agencies across the country could see an annual shortfall of $26 billion to $38 billion.

The $340 billion detailed in the appropriations document is in addition to $150 billion allotted for a Coronavirus Relief Fund specifically designated to provide state, local, and tribal government with additional resources to address the pandemic.

Two governors on Wednesday said the direct aid to states as outlined in the Senate’s aid package was not enough and indicated they would continue to lobby lawmakers in the House to increase the amount.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo was particularly critical of the Senate’s aid package, saying the $3.8 billion it provided directly to his hard-hit state “is a drop in the bucket as to need.” A rival proposal drafted by House Democrats would have provided $17 billion directly to New York, Cuomo said.

“We need the House to make adjustments,” Cuomo said.

States are largely shouldering much of the initial cost of the response to the pandemic outbreak, and Cuomo said New York’s response could top $15 billion.

Maryland Governor Larry Hogan, who serves as chairman of the National Governors Association, urged senators to pass the bill. But he also emphasized that governors had made a pitch for their states to receive much more from the aid package.

“Last week, the governors requested that one half of the federal stimulus package go directly to the

states," Hogan said. "The good news is the Senate has agreed to some aid to the states. And while it is not enough, I know they are negotiating back and forth with the House and it is encouraging that both parties have come to an agreement."

Route Fifty

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