

People need help more than ever, not a reduction in benefits

Aug. 10, 2020 at 2:12 pm | Updated Aug. 10, 2020 at 2:30 pm



A pedestrian passes by a boarded up Gap store in downtown Seattle in April. (AP Photo / Ted S. Warren, File)

By [Gordon McHenry Jr.](#)

Special to The Times

At a time when our country is facing one of the worst financial downturns in a century, with millions of people out of work and unable to find new employment, leaders in the U.S. Senate have engaged in denial, delay and dithering, finally proposing legislation that can only be described as woefully inadequate to meet the economic challenges this crisis presents.

The “[HEALS Act](#)” falls far short of its goal to support those who need the most help. It fails people who have lost jobs, many of whom were already struggling before the pandemic, and it fails our community. The bill proposes to slash the enhanced unemployment benefit from \$600 per week to \$200, and only continue that enhancement until September. After that, the bill would provide 70% of a worker’s pre-COVID-19 income. Rather than the healing the title implies, this bill would do more harm than good.

Since March, thousands of employers in our area have shuttered or paused their operations, leading to widespread economic anxiety and stress for the most vulnerable among us.

Some of those businesses will not reopen, and those that do could take [years](#) to recover from the pandemic’s financial hit, leaving the unemployed with nowhere to go and no way to put food on their tables. Nearly [436,000](#) workers in King County lost their jobs as retailers, restaurants and other businesses ceased operations in March. The unemployed need our help more than ever, not a reduction in benefits.

For many low-income people, and particularly communities of color who were already struggling to make ends meet, the additional unemployment benefit is keeping them afloat — barely. If it is reduced, many will face the impossible choice of bearing the cuts or trying to earn a living and risk getting infected.

Some senators have objected to the proposal, saying that the benefit will “[discourage](#)” unemployed people from seeking work. Even if there were jobs for the unemployed, the [evidence](#) shows that’s not the case.

In June, almost [250,000](#) Washington residents stated they were not able to pay their rent. That number will keep growing as long as the pandemic keeps ravaging the nation, leading to continued economic distress.

While we at United Way of King County have [helped](#) some people stay in their homes, the needs in our region greatly exceed the resources available.

Local and state governments across the nation have enacted eviction moratoriums, but tenants who have not been able to pay rent in months eventually will have to pay their landlords. How will they ever catch up?

In King County, [17,000](#) more households are now receiving basic food assistance since the beginning of the year, and 7% more women and children are enrolled in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program. Hunger and food insecurity will not magically disappear overnight, and cutting aid to families will only make the problem worse.

Some members of Congress have raised the alarm about rising [deficits](#) and the ballooning debt. But these are some of the same politicians who gladly voted to cut taxes for corporations and the wealthiest among us in 2017. Where are their priorities? They need to put themselves in the shoes of all those who are suffering and who don’t know where their next meal will come from.

We need lawmakers to focus on a plan to help people who lost their jobs due to the pandemic avoid eviction and stay in their homes. Bold and courageous action is needed to stabilize until recovery has occurred.

We need to put pressure on our lawmakers to ensure those who have been disproportionately hit by the recession get the help they need until our economy stabilizes. Senators and representatives need to prioritize help for the neediest members of our community whose lives have been upended by COVID-19. Cutting the enhanced unemployment benefit will result in more homelessness and families going hungry. We are better than that.

Gordon McHenry Jr. is president and CEO of United Way of King County.