



CIRCLE *of* PROTECTION

April 15, 2020

Dear Senator/Representative,

We write to you as the steering committee of the Circle of Protection, a coalition of church leaders from the main families of U.S. Christianity – Catholic, evangelical Protestant, ecumenical Protestant, the Historic African American churches, and Latino churches. As Christians, we believe that God is especially concerned with the plight of people in poverty – and that a key moral measure of government policies is how they treat those Jesus called “the least of these” (Matthew 25:45).

And for us, poverty and racism are integrally connected, and must always be dealt with together--we are all equally created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27) and public policy must always reflect that. People say that the COVID-19 coronavirus does not discriminate. But in fact, black and brown people with less access to safe and secure housing, to steady incomes, and to medical care and healthy bodies are more likely to be infected and die from this virus. Poverty and racism have become pre-existing conditions that also increase the chances of contracting this lethal disease.

We also believe that special attention is required for many vulnerable groups, including incarcerated individuals, people in detention, Native Americans, and people experiencing homelessness-- which is critical for an effective and compassionate response and must be reflected in all efforts to lessen the impact of the spread of COVID-19.

Thank you for quickly passing the first three COVID-19 response bills. Your legislation will provide urgently needed support to struggling families and help stabilize the economies of the US and its territories. Further significant action is needed. We implore you to quickly pass a fourth COVID response bill that addresses the needs of our country’s struggling households. Assistance measures should last not just for the duration of the health crisis or other short-term period but should be extended to remain in place as long as the economic crisis continues, and we urge you to give priority to the swelling ranks of people in poverty.

The Circle of Protection has long advocated to support SNAP, international assistance, and the lives of immigrants. We urge you to pay particular attention to these priorities now. We are committed to uprooting racism’s hold on our society. The crisis of racial injustice often lies in tandem with the crisis of poverty, hunger, incarceration and now COVID-19. Stemming from these shared priorities, the issues below are of concern to many of the church bodies and faith-based organizations in the Circle of Protection for a forthcoming COVID-19 bill:

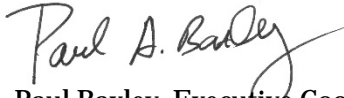
- **Increase SNAP benefits temporarily.** Even before the crisis, families receiving SNAP typically ran out of food assistance by the third week of the month. The disruptions of the crisis will drive many of these families into even more desperate need. Despite Congress’ expansion of unemployment insurance, many more families are suddenly unable to feed their children. Congress should temporarily increase the maximum SNAP benefit by 15 percent. A similar provision enacted in the ARRA legislation in 2009 was one of the single most effective policies that helped avert a big increase in poverty during that economic downturn. SNAP is one of the most direct ways to meet individual needs and also one of the most effective ways to bolster local economies and businesses.
- **International assistance.** This global pandemic and its economic and political fall-out are likely to hit hardest among extremely poor people around the world. Assistance in the areas of health, water and sanitation, food security, and nutrition is desperately needed. Nearly all governments will also need to take action to stabilize their economies. We urge Congress to provide additional international assistance through bilateral and multilateral channels. This is

a global pandemic and the health and preparation of one nation will affect that of other nations.

- **Ensure all immigrants can access testing, treatment, and other forms of needed assistance.** Ignoring the emergency needs of immigrants is not right and now poses a clear threat to the health of all Americans. Congress should extend Medicaid funding for testing and treatment to undocumented people. The cash assistance program in the CARES Act should extend to undocumented immigrants and their U.S. citizen children and spouses. Congress should also stipulate that public benefits during the COVID-19 emergency may not be considered in determinations as to whether an immigrant is likely to become a public charge. Without this assurance many immigrant families are forgoing urgently needed assistance for which they and their children, many of whom are U.S. citizens, are legally eligible. Further, farmworkers should be eligible for paid sick leave and unemployment insurance in all states and be provided with protective equipment, free COVID-19 testing, and sanitary facilities in the field. Finally, we are dismayed that deportations continue while so much of the economy is shut down.
- **Reestablish a flexible emergency fund for states.** In 2009, Congress established an emergency fund to help states provide additional assistance to low-income families. This mechanism worked well. Notably, it created 250,000 subsidized jobs. The legislation enacted to date to help those affected by COVID-19 and the related economic downturn did not include significant help for those living in the direst financial circumstances. This fund, for example, could be used to help families avert eviction and meet other immediate basic needs. Whatever funds you direct to low-income people will be spent immediately, providing more stimulus to the economy than most other components of stimulus legislation.
- **Provide resources for states to conduct free, fair, and safe elections.** COVID-19 threatens the integrity of the 2020 elections, and many low-income voters are likely to be disenfranchised. States need additional funding to expand voter registration, in-person early voting, no-excuse absentee voting by mail, voter education, and safe in-person voting on election day. For us, this is not a partisan issue. It is only right that people in poverty get a fair chance to vote.
- **Ensure a safe and accurate 2020 Census count.** Our once-in-decade Census is critical for fair representation in Congress, federal programs, state and local programs, and many private enterprise activities. Census Bureau operations and in-person programs of census education are already hindered. Congress should monitor the needs of the Census Bureau and be ready to accommodate budget and schedule adjustments.
- **Assist non-profit organizations.** Charities, churches, and other non-profits are on the frontlines of the crisis, providing food, shelter, health services, and other critical assistance, even as contributions are down. Congress should provide additional direct support to poverty-focused charities. It should allow taxpayers who use the short form to deduct much more than \$300 in charitable contributions.
- **Protect vulnerable borrowers.** In times of crisis desperate families turn to payday or car-title lenders who offer short-term loans, often with interest rates of 300% or more. These loans often lead to a spiraling debt trap. Congress already protects military service members with a 36% rate cap. This protection should be extended to all Americans.

We have always prayed for you, but even more in these difficult days. In the Bible, plagues and other disasters are often taken as a wake-up call. The COVID-19 crisis makes us all more aware of the connections among all people, including people on the margins of our economy and society. Neglect of the people who will be hardest hit by this crisis will lead to an even more deeply divided nation and world. But God will bless our nation if we provide help to poor and vulnerable people now.

Sincerely,
Members of the Circle of Protection Steering Committee



Paul Baxley, Executive Coordinator, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship



Sister Donna Markham, OP, PhD, President and CEO, Catholic Charities USA



* Rev. David Beckmann, President, Bread for the World



Dr. Mary Nelson, Interim President, Christian Community Development Association



John Carr, Director, Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, Georgetown University



Diane Randall, Executive Secretary, Friends Committee on National Legislation



The Most Rev. Michael B. Curry, Presiding Bishop and Primate, The Episcopal Church



Dr. Gabriel Salguero, President, National Latino Evangelical Coalition



The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton, Presiding Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



Rev. Lori Tapia, National Pastor for Hispanic Ministries, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)



Walter Kim, President, National Association of Evangelicals



* Rev. Jim Wallis, President and Founder, Sojourners



Rev. Dr. Jo Anne Lyon, Ambassador and General Superintendent Emerita, Wesleyan Church



* Dr. Barbara Williams-Skinner, Co-Convener, National African American Clergy Network and President, Skinner Leadership Institute



* Rev. Carlos Malavé, Executive Director, Christian Churches Together U.S.A. (in his personal capacity)



Jim Winkler, President and General Secretary, National Council of Churches

* Circle of Protection Steering Committee Co-ordinators are marked with an asterisk