



3/18/2020

From: Coalition of Communities of Color, Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council, Community Action Partnership of Oregon, Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon, PAALF Action Fund, Causa, Verde, Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility, 350 PDX, Portland Harbor Community Coalition

RE: Response to Novel Coronavirus COVID-19

Co-Chair Roblan, Co-Chair Holvey, and members of the Joint Committee on Coronavirus:

The undersigned are grateful for the opportunity to provide written testimony to the 2020 interim Joint Committee on Coronavirus Response (the Committee). We appreciate the swift creation of the Committee and the intentionality to address program, policy, and funding needs that can help Oregonians remain whole through a challenging time, and we applaud for leadership at every level of the state that has coalesced around preventive measures and community support.

We are all organizations who are committed to social, economic, and environmental justice, including the Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council, who advocate for and represent skilled, union construction and trades workers. We advocate for policy that supports communities who are at the frontlines of historical and present harm and disinvestment, especially black, indigenous, and other communities of color. In the face of a worsening public health crisis caused by novel coronavirus COVID-19 (COVID-19) we fear for the communities we represent around the state. Our communities will be hit hardest by economic impacts, be most likely to face barriers in seeking aid, and most medically vulnerable but with the least access to care or a vaccine or cure should it become available. The next few months will be devastating for many. But the reality is that the past few months, and years, and decades have already been devastating for black, indigenous, and other people of color especially, and for people experiencing low-incomes more broadly -- regardless of where they are in the state. What we are seeing now is merely a spotlight on the inequities in our social services, employment, housing, and healthcare systems. The opportunity before us as a state is not merely to provide short-term relief for an unprecedented cataclysm, but to pilot change that can be codified in future sessions to address the long-standing

struggles of poverty and racism.

To that end, we make the following recommendations, with the note that **all resources must be prioritized to Oregonians who have been historically marginalized and oppressed such as tribes, and black, indigenous, and other people of color.**

- **Unemployment/Worker Protections:** Expand unemployment insurance and remove barriers to access, especially for temporary workers and day laborers -- who are largely people of color. In general, **all resources for employment and support for people whose work, families, resources, and stability are impacted by COVID-19 should be made available regardless of job type, how someone is or was paid, immigration status, and whether they have a physical address.** This includes, **expanding and requiring access to sick days and paid leave to cover at least a fourteen-day absence.** Job protection/anti-retaliation measures for medically vulnerable workers are also imperative..
- **Assistance Programs:** Existing anti-poverty programs should be expanded and made more flexible so that families can meet their need. **Cash assistance** must be made available, especially for people who do not have paid sick leave, in addition to **special assistance for people who are affected by COVID-19** and may have new barriers to accessing resources and support. **Childcare vouchers must also be provided and childcare made free, safe, and widely available.**
- **Housing Stability:** Oregon is already in a significant housing affordability crisis that will only be made worse as more people lose income. The Legislature should follow the lead of jurisdictions that have enacted **eviction moratoria** and prevent evictions for the next year **for both residential and commercial tenants.** But even if people can maintain housing and business stability, additional resources or strategies will be necessary to address collection including **waiving late fees, expanding rental assistance,** and exploring **mechanisms to absorb, adjust, or forgive rent** such that no one is faced with an untenable financial burden and eviction after COVID-19 is contained. **Regulated affordable housing providers should also be supported through direct assistance** to subsidize rent and utilities and provide additional services that may be needed to address the effects of the pandemic. Finally, **services for people experiencing houselessness** should be expanded, **especially around health and hygiene, camping bans should be lifted and camping sweeps banned,** and **land use should be explored as a tool to create safe places for people to rest, recover, and receive support,** including vacant lots and buildings.

- **Technology Access:** For the past two sessions, the Legislature has considered whether to expand rural broadband access. In a time, when technology access may be essential to survival, employment, health information, and connectivity, we must ensure that barriers in this realm are removed. **Universal broadband access** should be initiated immediately starting in remote communities, and **resources should be extended to support needed technology acquisition for** rural, coastal, and remote communities, and communities in more developed **areas with barriers to technology access**. This work can be made more significant by BOLI and Business Oregon investments in **online job training platforms such as pre-apprenticeships that can help displaced workers** to gain new skills and enter more stable industries with higher wages.
- **Job Creation and Wealth-Building for Communities:** In the vein of job creation, online training can help prepare communities for new jobs, but those jobs must be available quickly. National calls for a Green New Deal would lead to massive **infrastructure investments around green and clean energy projects**. Oregon needs its own approach in this regard and with new emissions reductions goals, immediate investments in projects will help jumpstart local economies and create well-paying jobs that can be sustained. These projects must be **prioritized for black, indigenous, and other communities of color, tribes, and rural, coastal, or remote communities; resources should be directed to community energy planning and projects** that can help to ensure maximum local benefit. Finally, **prevailing wage must be expanded so that workers and their families receive full family health benefits** and do not add to the financial responsibility to Oregon.
- **Utilities:** Positive efforts have already been made by some energy utilities to halt disconnections and waive late fees and interest accrual, but this does not account for mounting bills that will push the limits of our already oversubscribed energy assistance programs, nor does this account for the lack of assistance for water bills. This is a public health issue, as families are made more medically vulnerable if they are keeping their heat too low or making difficult choices between utilities, food, and medicine. With regard to utility access and regulation, the Legislature must immediately:
 - **Establish a statewide moratorium on utility disconnections for both investor- and consumer-owned utilities for one year.**
 - **Authorize the Oregon Public Utility Commission to allow differentiated rates,** based on an income-related threshold, that can provide relief **for energy-burdened, residential ratepayers**. All **utilities should be mandated to conduct immediate explorations as to how rate design might help redistribute arrearages** and keep bills from piling up.

- **Expand Oregon Energy Assistance Program resources** significantly to help supplement rate design and **establish utility bill assistance for small businesses prioritized for women- and minority-owned entities.**
- **Establish a water bill assistance program** so that Oregonians in need can have all of their utility bills covered. At present there is no statewide source of funding for water assistance and this necessary aid is missing in too many communities.
- **Mandate logistical changes to bill collection** and accrual including **waiving late fees, suspending interest accrual on overdue balances for all utilities,** and **explore the financial viability of bill forgiveness for investor-owned utilities** such that costs are shifted to shareholders rather than ratepayers.
- **Transportation:** Oregon must develop a **program for transportation assistance or vouchers for essential employees with lower incomes** that could be distributed through third parties like community-based organizations, Community Action agencies, or employers. Additionally, **public transit systems should be made fareless for the next year.**
- **Investments in Community-Based Organizations:** Community-based organizations (CBOs) serve community at the frontline of a crisis, but we are already stretched thin and under-resourced. We are also sometimes the best conduits for resources and information and will be essential in identifying community needs. Wherever possible, all **financial assistance and programs** developed by the Committee **should be made available and easy to distribute by third parties like CBOs and Community Action agencies.** Additionally, the State should **establish an emergency grant program for CBOs, housing authorities, and social service organizations** that can be used to flexibly support communities around the state as new needs and opportunities emerge.
- **Taskforce/Governance:** As collective work begins to address the needs of communities around Oregon, all such bodies, including **taskforces must include significant representation from black, indigenous, and other communities of color, immigrant and refugee communities, tribes, and labor, including farmworkers.** Token seats are not enough. These are the communities who will be hurt first and worst and must have a strong voice in how to create solutions that provide benefits and do not create new or exacerbate existing burdens.

Current public health efforts are directed at flattening the curve of COVID-19 cases, but poverty and racism have been and continue to be pandemics; we must flatten the curves of inequity and oppression with the same urgency. We have a key moment to do so and we must act swiftly to address immediate and exacerbated needs that result from the current emergency and an

increasingly unstable economic situation. In the coming months, we also must remember that the same communities we rush to help now are communities who have been hurting and will continue to hurt in the future unless we address the social pathogens and economic environments that contribute to a greater epidemic. We urge the Committee and the Legislature to not think merely short-term and seize the opportunity to make lasting and needed change to heal historical and present harm.

Sincerely,

Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon

Causa

Coalition of Communities of Color

Community Action Partnership of Oregon

Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility

Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council

PAALF Action Fund

Portland Harbor Community Coalition

Verde

350 PDX