

MEMORANDUM

To: Chairman Neal
From: Racial Equity Initiative Co-Chairs Reps. Sewell, Gomez, and Horsford
Date: July 2021
Subj: Initial Recommendations for Racial Equity in American Jobs and Family Plan

I. OVERVIEW

The Biden Administration is advocating for the next significant piece of legislation to actualize the vision set forth in the American Family (AFP) and Jobs Plans (AJP). Concurrently, the Administration is implementing many policies enacted through the American Rescue Plan (ARP). Together, Congress and the Administration can meet this historic moment by wielding federal policy to mitigate adverse experiences and outcomes associated with generations of systemic discrimination and racism. These vehicles represent rare opportunities to advocate for restorative and transformative legislation and equally intentional implementation by the Executive Branch.

This memo outlines priorities, issues, and recommendations on behalf of the Committee on Ways and Means Racial Equity Initiative, co-chaired by Reps. Terri A. Sewell, Jimmy Gomez, and Steven Horsford. Some of the recommendations relate to matters beyond the Committee's jurisdiction or current priorities. However, we want to highlight relevant intersections between the President's proposals and the Committee's racial, health, and economic equity priorities.

II. INFRASTRUCTURE, CLIMATE CHANGE MITIGATION, & ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

A. Infrastructure

Infrastructure represents the facilities, systems, and services that allow nations to sustain essential functions across households, businesses, and communities. Looking beyond roads, bridges, railways, and public utilities producing goods to support a functioning society, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the equal importance of adequate human infrastructure. Throughout the public health emergency, the United States (U.S.) has valued the people who work in jobs and professions that provide invaluable health, education, and nutrition services for the public good – the essential workforce. The nation has also grappled with rural and frontier communities facing logistical challenges that complicate equitable access to testing and vaccinations, and the inequitable uptake of the same among non-White racial and ethnic groups in densely populated urban centers. COVID-19 has indeed forced nations across the globe to adapt the definition of infrastructure to cover all categories of essential and critical facilities, systems, and services. As the Biden Administration is prioritizing racial equity and has committed to modernizing the nation's infrastructure, it will be critical for the federal government to:

- Maximize opportunities to target resources for green energy and other climate change mitigation activities to low-income communities of color;

- Mitigate gaps in access to affordable mass transit options for underserved communities and remote regions;
- Ensure policies focused on home ownership provide equitable opportunities to support modernization of existing homes owned by members of historically marginalized groups and in underserved communities;
- Support the development of federal knowledge and support hubs to provide technical assistance on best practices for sustainability and modernization in consideration of regionality (e.g., topography, geography, and demographic differences); and
- Prioritize incentives to reinforce capacity and affordability of essential critical infrastructure (including modern water lines, sewer systems, and broadband) in historically marginalized communities including areas disproportionately represented by racial and ethnic groups.

B. Climate Change Mitigation and Environmental Justice

Climate change threatens physical and mental health, air, water, food, and shelter, with people of color and other socially and economically disadvantaged or underserved communities facing the greatest threats. During the winter of 2021, residents in southern states experienced historically low temperatures that crippled electrical grids and ravaged public utilities, leaving communities of color most adversely and longest impacted. Throughout 2020, the western states fought record-breaking wildfires that destroyed millions of acres and left some of the worst air quality conditions on the planet.

In the U.S., the communities most vulnerable to climate change are those comprised largely of people of color, immigrants, low-income individuals, and people with limited English proficiency. Climate change mitigation efforts that center environmental justice are essential for racial equity in disproportionately affected and marginalized communities. Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people in the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. As the Biden Administration is prioritizing racial equity and has recommitted the nation to combatting climate change, it will be critical for the federal government to:

- Target benefits of investments in clean energy and electrification to environmental justice communities;
- Expand access to clean energy and energy efficiency investments to low-income individuals and community nonprofits serving or employing low-income individuals;
- Expand access to zero-emission vehicles, e-bikes, and associated infrastructure to low-income individuals and clean up the air in environmental justice communities by incentivizing zero-emission busses, vans, and trucks; and
- Revive Superfund taxes to ensure that polluters pay to clean up the sites of hazardous waste, which are more likely to be near communities of color.

III. HEALTH AND ECONOMIC EQUITY

A. Health Workforce, Coverage, and Medicare Benefits

The pandemic exploited existing inequities, causing devastating and disproportionate health impacts for communities of color. Yet this realization occurred alongside undeniable economic inequities that also are overwhelmingly borne by historically marginalized, lower-income, and underserved populations. As the Biden Administration is prioritizing racial equity and health equity, it will be critical for the federal government to:

- Support expansion of the physician workforce by providing educational and training resources to members of historically marginalized communities, including underrepresented racial and ethnic groups;
- Address health insurance coverage gaps for nearly 30 million disproportionately low-income people and people of color who are currently uninsured or under-insured, and expand their access to health care providers;
- Make improvements to Medicare benefits, including low-income programs and expanded coverage for dental, vision, and hearing services under fee-for-service, and fully maximize opportunities to address social determinants of health;
- Develop data infrastructure to support reporting, collection, and evaluation of racial and ethnic disparities, including differences in outcomes for beneficiaries with limited English proficiency, within the Medicare program;
- Reauthorize and expand Health Profession Opportunity Grants to support low-income workers and people of color in training for in-demand health careers that give them a ladder for success;
- Reauthorize the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program, which has been identified as a key tool to improve maternal health and reduce morbidity and mortality among women of color, and increase the number of families it serves;
- Support the ability of older adults and people with disabilities to remain in the home through new programs that improve post-acute care options as well as home and caregiver supports for Medicare beneficiaries;
- Ensure telehealth and virtual care expansions center racial, health, and economic equity in design and implementation, and prioritize high quality health technologies developed using anti-bias principles and methods;
- Improve staffing standards, transparency, and reporting in the nursing home industry to improve accountability for resident care and explore incentives to modernize infrastructure and the culture of care in nursing home settings and the quality of work for long-term services and supports workforce;

- Modernize the Elder Justice Act to ensure seniors and people with disabilities have access to services and supports to mitigate abuse, mistreatment, and exploitation of this vulnerable population;
- Modernize Medicare program integrity approaches to help mitigate concerns about disproportionate burden that fraud, waste, and abuse among providers/suppliers can have on beneficiaries of color; and
- Ensure the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) commits resources and personnel to nondiscrimination protection enforcement, including priorities and potential actions related to racial discrimination in health care facilities.

B. Economic Equity and Worker Supports

The social distancing element of the COVID-19 response not only magnified the extent to which resources correlate to resources and opportunities within communities, but how far behind communities with higher proportions of residents of color are due to decades of underinvestment and disinvestment. The pandemic has also highlighted a great degree of instability within the working class, particularly among lower-wage and caregiving professions. As the Biden Administration is prioritizing racial equity and supporting bold, transformational economic reforms, it will be critical for the federal government to:

- Make permanent expansions to the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit, some of our nation's largest anti-poverty programs that benefit workers and families of color;
- Enact paid family and medical leave for all workers, including low-income workers, people of color, and care economy workers who have disproportionately less access to paid leave;
- Address shortages and expand child care access for all workers and support for the child care workforce which is disproportionately comprised of women of color;
- Create wealth building opportunities for children, such as child savings accounts or baby bonds;
- Incorporate wealth accruing opportunities for part-time workers with reasonable years of service;
- Expand coverage in employer retirement plans and increase retirement savings by making the Saver's Credit refundable and creating automatic IRAs;
- Improve Social Security benefits for caregivers and families by:
 - Enacting caregiver credits for individuals who take time out of the workforce to care for family members;
 - Restoring student benefits for college and other post-secondary students with disabled, deceased, or retired parents;
 - Extending dependent benefits to children living with grandparents or other relatives who receive Social Security benefits; and

- Improving widow(er) benefits for dual-earner couples;
- Improve Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits, including:
 - Ending the 5-month waiting period; and
 - Increasing the SSDI family maximum, which is more restrictive than the family maximum for retiree or survivor benefits;
- Restore and strengthen Social Security’s special minimum benefit for long-serving, low-wage workers;
- Help American families accumulate emergency savings while increasing targeted financial wellness advice and assistance with saving, debt, and budgeting;
- Prioritize comprehensive job training and financial support for individuals in economically distressed communities experiencing adverse impact on quality jobs due to trade policies;
- Introduce more participatory processes for diverse communities to engage in trade policymaking and ensure inclusive data-gathering to assess and inform impacts on those communities; and
- Expand access to higher education for communities of color through community college and job training programs and grants.

C. Community Investment

Community investment and racial inequities tend to go hand-in-hand. In many instances, underserved urban and rural communities that have experienced decades of government-sanctioned disinvestment (i.e., redlining and eminent domain takings for highways and other projects), job losses, and closures of vital health care infrastructure are often home to a disproportionate number of residents with lower income and those who are members of non-White racial and ethnic groups. From the side of developers, larger companies that tend to be less racially and ethnically diverse are more routinely “shovel ready” and thus eligible to be first in line for incentives to revitalize communities. For the communities on the receiving end of such investment, the arrival of fresh funds tends to also signify the whitewashing of communities and cultures maintained by people of color for decades. As the Biden Administration is prioritizing racial equity in the context of historic marginalization, it will be critical for the federal government to:

- Maximize opportunities to target resources for physical improvements to underserved communities;
- Update reporting requirements for charities, foundations, and social welfare organizations to provide more information about their activities targeted to low-income, underserved, and minority communities; and
- Increase the supply of affordable housing, especially for extremely low-income individuals and individuals requiring supportive services to retain permanent housing.