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Blue Dog Task Force Policy Recommendations for COVID-19 Pandemic Response

Task Force on Economic Growth:

- Modify the Small Business Administration (SBA) disaster loan program, established under the *Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act*, by making the following changes: 1) authorize states rather than counties to be designated as disaster areas, 2) increase loan amounts, 3) reduce interest rates on loans, and 4) enact other changes to make program more effective and efficient.
- Provide financial institutions the ability to make good faith efforts to modify loan terms, including but not limited to fee waivers, payment dates, and deferrals without incurring penalties from regulators.
- Create a telework tax credit for businesses that would cover the cost for a business to transition their operations to telework. This credit could be implemented again during future national emergencies that would make telework necessary.
- Give access to working capital to businesses of all sizes through grants or loans as needed. This will help businesses cover monthly rent, payroll, and other liabilities, and, in turn, it would help to prevent mass layoffs.

Task Force on Fiscal Responsibility and Government Reform:

- In order to prevent misuse of taxpayer dollars, Congress should create a separate Inspector General position to oversee the federal dollars sent to businesses and individuals. This office can be modeled after the Special Inspector General (SIGTARP) position that was established to oversee the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) in 2008.
- Congress should ensure funding is designated only for the response to the public health emergency, and attach accountability measures, including sunset clauses, to ensure the emergency funding is regularly evaluated for need and effectiveness.
- Following the conclusion of the coronavirus national emergency, Congress should direct the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to lead a comprehensive review of the government response to the pandemic. This review should be integrated into a whole-of-government strategic

plan that helps identify what government resources can be effectively and efficiently used during times of varying national emergencies, and how to best activate them. This review should be used to help ensure that the government is better prepared to deal with a similar crisis in the future.

Task Force on Infrastructure and Job Creation:

- Strengthen the emergency family and medical leave provisions included in the *Families First Coronavirus Response Act* by expanding eligibility for paid leave to include the following: 1) workers who test positive for COVID-19, 2) workers who are directed or recommended by a health professional to be quarantined, and 3) workers who need to care for family members who have coronavirus or are quarantined.
- The 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) provided a one-time economic recovery payment of \$250, made by the Secretary of the Treasury within 120 days of enactment, to those receiving Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, Railroad Retirement, and certain VA programs. Congress should implement a policy based on that model. However, it should do so with the following changes: 1) increase the payment amount and frequency of payments, 2) accelerate speed of payments, and 3) expand eligible recipients for receiving these payments.
- Create an employee retention tax credit (ERTC) specific to the coronavirus response. This would be similar to the credit Congress has historically enacted after weather-related disasters. The ERTC would provide employers additional economic support to help retain employees on payroll rather than be forced to lay them off. The credit should be triggered by a certain percentage of revenue loss, and Congress should implement guardrails to prevent business from misusing the extra funds coming from the tax credit.

Task Force on National Security:

- Congress and the Trump Administration should further consider measures to hold social media companies accountable if they allow disinformation on COVID-19 to run rampant on their platforms. Disinformation on COVID-19 not only sows confusion and discord, it can also cost human lives. Social media companies have a public responsibility to ensure that fact-based announcements from public officials are easily disseminated, while misinformation is immediately flagged and removed.
- President Trump must utilize his authority under the Defense Production Act of 1950, or take any other necessary step, to increase the manufacturing capacity of critical medical supplies like N-95 masks, other personal protective equipment (PPE), ventilator machines, and testing kits.
- The Trump Administration must immediately fill key positions in federal agencies and departments that are critical to pandemic prevention and response, including the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA), the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary or Preparedness and Response, and the disbanded Pandemic Unit within the National Security Council.

Task Force on Rural Opportunity:

- Appropriate funding to the Department of Education for grants that support online learning in K-12 schools and institutions of higher education, including targeted assistance to students in rural, tribal, and underserved communities, which lack adequate access to broadband services.
- Provide the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) with emergency authority to temporarily loosen E-Rate program rules. This will provide immediate funding for schools to purchase and operate hotspots, which would allow for students in rural, tribal, and underserved areas, to participate in distance learning. Congress could also create a one-time emergency program designed to purchase connectivity for educational use.
- Direct the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to ensure that any domestic or international travel restrictions do not apply to the country's frontline and essential personnel, including traveling nurses and other medical professionals. These professionals are especially needed in rural, tribal, or underserved areas.
- Direct the Department of Agriculture to ensure that domestic and international travel restrictions do not jeopardize food supply chains and keep disruptions to the supply chains to a minimum.
- Reimburse hospitals for hiring additional essential health workers, including traveling nurses, to meet the increased need, especially in rural hospital that are particularly understaffed.
- Allow physicians and practitioners in rural health clinics (RHCs) and federally qualified community health centers (FQHCs) to provide distant site telehealth visits to their patients under Medicare. Congress can do so by passing Section 7 of *H.R. 4932, the CONNECT for Health Act of 2019*.
- Instruct the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to provide a plan for rural hospitals to receive periodic interim payments (PIP) in order to increase cash flow during a time of high costs and high patient volume.
- Direct the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to establish a Virtual Provider Pilot Program, which would test and implement patient monitoring technology to care for patients who are unable to travel long distances to health facilities.
- Expand the Certified Community Behavioral Health Center demonstration program to greatly improve access to mental health services. As people across the country practice social distancing and are forced to self-quarantine or self-isolate to prevent further spread of COVID-19, an increased sense of isolation will lead to unforeseen mental health challenges, and Congress must be sure to address those challenges when possible.

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