Majority Leader Schumer, Minority Leader McConnell, Speaker Pelosi, and Minority Leader McCarthy:

On behalf of the National Coalition for Housing Justice, we are writing to urge you to include funding to support people experiencing homelessness in the next COVID-19 relief and recovery package. While we applaud bipartisan efforts to-date, current funding and proposals fail to fully account for the needs of people who are experiencing homelessness, especially those who are currently living outside or in other places not meant for human habitation such as vehicles, sheds, parks, or abandoned buildings.

We strongly encourage Congress to:

1. Provide $6 billion in new funding through Emergency Solutions Grants;
2. Extend, strengthen, and enforce the national eviction moratorium
3. Provide $30 billion in additional emergency rental and utility assistance;
4. Provide $28 billion in new funding for Housing Choice Vouchers; and
5. Provide $44 billion in capital investments for homelessness assistance through the National Housing Trust Fund

Additional detail on each of these priorities is outlined below.

Provide $6 billion in new funding for Emergency Solutions Grants (adding $1 billion to President Biden’s proposal). The roughly 252,000 people experiencing unsheltered homelessness are highly vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 due to underlying health conditions that are exacerbated by their living conditions must be prioritized for non-congregate shelter. These funds are also needed to help prevent and respond to outbreaks among people who are already experiencing homelessness. People who are homeless and contract coronavirus are much more likely to be hospitalized, to require critical care, and to die than the general public. These hospitalizations, critical care needs, and deaths have significant implications for individuals, their communities, and our already overstretched hospital systems. Funds are needed to move people living in homeless encampments and congregate shelters to safe alternative spaces, including hotels, as well as funding for short-term rental assistance and housing stabilization services.

Extend, strengthen, and enforce the federal eviction moratorium (which is included in President Biden’s recent relief proposal). To prevent the spread of COVID-19 and help keep millions of renters stably housed, Congress should extend the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) eviction moratorium through the duration of the public health emergency. An extension, on its own, is insufficient.

The moratorium should be improved to address several shortcomings. As it stands now, renters are only protected under the moratorium if they know about it and affirmatively submit a “declarative statement” to their landlords. Instead, the moratorium should provide automatic, universal protection to renters and it should apply to all stages of eviction. Moreover, federal agencies must better enforce the moratorium. The Department of Justice under President Trump did not provide any mechanism for renters to file complaints against landlords who violate the moratorium.

Additionally, Congress should ensure renters cannot be evicted for back rent accumulated during the pandemic, provide renters a reasonable time to repay back rent accumulated during the pandemic, prohibit late fees and penalties, and prevent evictions from being reported to consumer agencies. Further, the moratorium on evictions should be extended to incorporate current CDC guidance that encampments should not be evicted unless
individual housing units are made available, or, in their absence, provision of adequate sanitation services for the encampments to safely remain in place.

Provide $30 billion in emergency rental and utility assistance (which is included in President Biden’s recent relief proposal). While an eviction moratorium during the pandemic is necessary, it is not sufficient alone. A moratorium still allows rent arrears to accumulate and many people who have lost income because of the pandemic will struggle to cover large sums of back-rent once it comes due. The moratorium must be paired with emergency rental and utility assistance so that renters do not fall off a financial cliff once back-rent is owed and landlords continue to receive rental income, which, in turn, enables them to continue to operate their properties. An additional $30 billion in emergency rental and utility assistance administered through HUD will help eliminate back rent and utilities owed by low-income renters, build capacity of program administrators to get the money out quickly to those most in need, and provide legal and other services to help renters avoid unnecessary and unlawful evictions.

Provide $28 billion for 5-year funding of 500,000 new housing vouchers. States and localities are working hard to administer the $25 billion in emergency rental assistance that Congress approved in December, and hopefully there are more emergency rental assistance dollars that Congress will soon authorize.

To ease the administrative workload on states and localities, some federal rental assistance should also be provided via the Housing Choice Voucher program, which is a separate administrative network that can deliver aid to people who need help quickly. Moreover, vouchers offer long-term support that emergency rental assistance does not. An additional $30 billion in emergency rental assistance is needed to wipe out the rent and utilities arrears that low-income renters have accrued during the pandemic so far, but vouchers offer ongoing aid that many of the lowest income people need to avoid future debt arrears and maintain housing stability. Due to the persistent and widening gap between high rents and low wages, the lowest income renters were precariously housed prior to the pandemic and will likely remain so long after. During his presidential campaign, President Biden articulated a commitment to universal vouchers so that everyone who qualifies for help receives it. Investing in 500,000 new vouchers immediately could be a down payment towards the president’s long-term vision.

Provide $44 billion in capital investments for homelessness assistance through the National Housing Trust Fund. During the pandemic, states and localities worked quickly and creatively to move individuals experiencing homelessness into non-congregate settings, including hotels and motels. Now, these communities need resources to help individuals exit these facilities to permanent housing solutions, rather than allowing them to be pushed back into homelessness. We estimate that $44 billion in National Housing Trust Fund resources are needed to help states and localities acquire and convert non-traditional properties, including hotels, motels, and commercial real estate, into long-term housing solutions for people experiencing homelessness and to reconfigure shelters into healthier environments.

As you know, our unhoused neighbors are extremely vulnerable to every negative impact of the pandemic, from high risks of virus exposure, obstacles to healthy recovery, to job insecurity and social isolation. The challenges to meeting these needs are significant, but we have an unprecedented opportunity to turn the tide on homelessness and housing insecurity for the whole of the country through our joint relief and recovery efforts. We’re looking forward to working with you toward a healthy recovery for all.

Sincerely,
Members of the National Coalition for Housing Justice:

Community Solutions
CSH
Funders Together to End Homelessness
Heartland Alliance
National Alliance to End Homelessness
National Coalition for Homeless Veterans
National Health Care for the Homeless Council
National Homelessness Law Center
National Innovation Service
National Low Income Housing Coalition
True Colors United
Youth Collaboratory

CC: Banking, House Financial Services, and Transportation and Housing and Urban Development Committee and Subcommittee Leadership, Acting Secretary Ammon of the Department of Housing and Urban Development