



Council of the District of Columbia
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The Honorable Muriel Bowser
Mayor, District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Mayor Bowser:

Thank you for your leadership during the COVID-19 emergency. We faced interwoven, once-in-a-lifetime public health and economic challenges, and now we face another great challenge of recovering from this incredible crisis. We have an equally remarkable opportunity to make transformational change with the \$2.3 billion in federal dollars coming to the District from the American Rescue Plan.

COVID-19 highlighted the great inequities in our city, and we have a truly unprecedented chance to move in a different direction, learn from past mistakes, and create a much more just and egalitarian District of Columbia.

My recommendation is to go big, to put these dollars quickly and strategically into the hands of those who need it the most: The residents and businesses who were impacted most directly by COVID-19. As you will see below, I ask that you allocate cash payments to workers and businesses who suffered economically during these last 14 months. I also want to use these dollars to bring structure and modern organizational management to our unemployment system: I'm not talking about the IT platform, which is already funded, but a functional call center and workflow that is customer-friendly and empowers our front-line workers who want to do the right thing but are stymied by the current chaotic approach.

Yet workers and businesses aren't the only groups impacted: Our public schools students experienced great loss as well, not only in learning but social-emotional development. We can use this money to address this in a truly transformational way. We also have residents who need housing, but due to our dearth of deeply

affordable housing and insufficient social services have pitched a tent on our streets. Let's use this money to get our residents the housing and supportive services they need to live successfully in homes.

Finally, racial inequity and transforming public safety has been interwoven into the public discussion these last 14 months. We have a great opportunity with these dollars to put money behind the rhetoric. I advocate for funding some of the biggest recommendations of the police reform commission, which recently released a thorough and lengthy report.

Specifically, I request the stimulus funds be used in the following ways:

BUILDING BACK DC'S ECONOMY

Stimulus Checks Worth Up to \$10,000 for DC Residents Who Qualified for Unemployment Insurance and Pandemic Unemployment Assistance Since March 2020

Nearly 200,000 workers filed for some type of unemployment assistance with DC since the declaration of the public health emergency, which put unprecedented strains on our worker safety net. Some workers did not see payments for months, which forced them into credit card debt and other frightening economic circumstances. With the American Rescue Plan funds, we should rescue DC workers with a local stimulus check of up to \$10,000, phasing out until residents earn more than \$80,000 (\$160,000 for a couple). To be clear, this money would only be for District of Columbia residents, who make up about half of the workers who rely on DC's unemployment system. This is a far more flexible and powerful way to help our residents, instead of creating multiple new programs with different aims and application requirements. Instead, the Office of Tax and Revenue would just mail a check to qualifying residents, as the IRS did with the federal stimulus checks.

We Also Need to Help Impacted DC Workers Excluded from UI and PUA

As you know, not all DC workers who were financially impacted by COVID-19 could collect unemployment assistance. Our excluded workers are hurt by the pandemic just as much as anyone else, but they aren't getting the same federal support as everyone else. The \$1,000 per person the Council set aside last year was a good start, and unprecedented. We should significantly expand that support by including them in a stimulus checks program.

DC Should Make Unemployment Insurance Not Subject to Income Tax

We shouldn't tax our safety net programs. Already, 16 states don't tax unemployment insurance benefits, and DC should join them. Recent federal legislation has exempted the first \$10,200 of unemployment benefits, and that exclusion is also in effect for DC taxes as well. But it's only for one year. The District should act to permanently make all such benefits not subject to local income taxes.

Hire Experts to Completely Restructure and Retrain Our Unemployment Compensation Division, Including the Customer Call Center

DC is building a modern IT system to replace its antiquated COBOL-coded system, which is great, but much more emphasis needs to be placed on the upgrading and modernizing the call center and workflow practices. Right now there is a system of chaos that needs to be structured. Let's use the federal dollars to bring in experts to truly modernize our approach, leveraging technology and the best customer service practices.

Fund Business Support Grants of Up to \$50,000 for DC Local Businesses With Additional Incentives of \$25,000 For Those Who Hire DC Residents and Participate in the Summer Youth Employment Program

This pandemic has been devastating to our businesses, especially our small and locally owned businesses. While the Mayor and the Council have acted to provide financial support, it's clear we need to do more. Many businesses are facing staggering amounts of deferred rent, which will be due over the year following the end of the public health emergency. As a result, even though the economy will be opening up in the coming months, it is likely DC will continue to lose small and local businesses even after the end of the pandemic. Early in the pandemic, DC gave 6,500 businesses microgrants of up to \$14,000. The District could provide those same businesses grants of up to \$50,000, enough to significantly reduce rent burdens or other debts, and be the difference between closing and staying open over the next year. Additionally, DC should provide \$25,000 in incentives to businesses that hire DC residents and participate in SYEP. Our summer youth program is one of the most meaningful jobs programs we have, but every year, we struggle to get meaningful private sector participation. Having our grantees participate in the program would transform SYEP for years to come, helping thousands of District residents prepare for their futures.

BUILDING DC's FUTURE WORKFORCE

Fund UDC-Community College and Workforce Development Lifelong Learning Programs Focused on Strategic Industry Sectors

The impact of the public health emergency pushed the demand for IT and healthcare professionals beyond what the current District workforce development system can provide. To ensure the residents most impacted by the pandemic are prepared and ready for employment in these sectors, I ask for a significant increase in the subsidy for the University of DC Community College and its Workforce Development & Lifelong Learning division, for tuition, equipment, and facility upgrades in IT, healthcare, and related fields where jobs are plentiful. Our neighbors in VA and MD have already made these investments, and now is the time for DC to do the same and prepare a competitive workforce.

Significantly Expand School-Based Mental Health Supports and Boost Essential Health Staff

This past year has been a difficult emotional challenge for all of us, but particularly for our young people in school. It has taken a toll on social-emotional development. DC currently provides mental health services to students, including assigning behavioral health clinicians to schools. We should use the federal schools grants to continue to grow these programs, to reduce caseloads, and to ensure every student has meaningful access to behavioral health staff, social workers, and socio-emotional support programs. As students return in-person, we should look at expanding the budgets for school nurses so that schools with students on-site always have a nurse on-site.

I concur with two recommendations of the DC Police Reform Commission, which advocated for an additional \$6.4 million to put a community-based clinician in every public school. It also recommended additional school counselors, psychologists, and social workers to meet professional association standards, costing an additional \$20.6 million.

Hire Additional Educators for One-on-One Tutoring and Small Group Learning

Many students are behind on their work or failing, and our teachers and paraprofessionals are stretched thin trying to help. Low student-teacher ratios and intensive one-on-one tutoring are among the most effective teaching interventions available, but they are costly. We should take advantage of the significant influx of money to enable schools to hire additional educators for small group learning and significantly increase our one-on-one tutoring programs. In addition to supporting students' academic growth, this approach would relieve the pressure on our current teachers and paraprofessionals and enable more effective work in every classroom.

BUILDING A HOME IN DC FOR EVERYONE

Fund Permanent Support Housing Vouchers and Supportive Services

Even the Chairman of the Federal Reserve has said that we need to do better for our unhoused residents: We need to get them in homes with the supportive services that they need to live successful lives. Let's use the American Rescue Plan money to bring robust social services to our residents in encampments and fund the Permanent Supportive Housing vouchers needed to move them from the streets to a permanent home.

BUILDING A MORE EQUITABLE APPROACH TO PUBLIC SAFETY

Fund Three Specific Recommendations Made by the DC Police Reform Commission

The DC Police Reform Commission just released a lengthy report of many recommendations, and I'd like to highlight three to fund immediately:

- Make community-competent behavioral health professionals the default first responders to 911 calls involving individuals in crisis and create the Community Crime Prevention Teams required under the NEAR Act.
- Replace police in schools with a holistic public health approach to school safety and crisis intervention that is restorative and trauma-informed. This should include school-based violence interrupter programming and training and community-based violence interrupter expansion: \$5.6 million for the creation of school-based violence interrupter teams that are assigned to the designated safe passage priority areas in Wards 1, 5, 6, 7, and 8.
- Fund safe passage programs driven by community members, with at least \$2.5 million to a pilot of 150- 200 community members to support with safe passage.

I know there are many competing visions for this funding, and it's tempting to try to do a lot of different things with the money. But I encourage you to keep the money focused on directly helping our residents and small businesses. I hope you consider this request, and I hope to discuss it with you and your team.

Sincerely yours,
Elissa.