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February 25, 2021

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House  
U.S. House of Representatives  
1236 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Republican Leader  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2468 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer  
Majority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
322 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Republican Leader  
U.S. Senate  
317 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader McCarthy, Leader Schumer and Leader McConnell:

AARP, on behalf of our nearly 38 million members and all older Americans nationwide, appreciates the enormous amount of work Congress continues to undertake to address the unprecedented public health and economic crisis that we face as a nation. The gravity of the present challenge requires both the recently enacted legislation and additional resources and investments to tackle the growing health and financial needs of the American people. It also requires solutions to protect the health and safety of those who have been hardest hit or at highest risk through the pandemic.

### **Vaccine Distribution**

AARP has heard from many thousands of older Americans who are angry, frustrated, and disappointed by the confusing and complicated vaccine distribution system. We cannot stress enough how difficult this process has been for so many Americans as they have tried to navigate multiple websites, confusing signup systems, understaffed phone lines, and confusing categories of prioritization.

AARP strongly supports the additional funding in this package to distribute and administer COVID-19 vaccines. Congress must ensure that Americans, especially older Americans, can receive *clear* information on what they can anticipate and when they may have the opportunity to receive the vaccine. Older Americans account for more than 95% of the COVID-19 deaths, which is why they are rightfully demanding vaccine prioritization. Congress must take steps to support their need to be protected from this virus.

We believe federal and state governments should improve the current vaccine infrastructure, while expanding the ways that individuals can receive a vaccine. Older Americans are familiar with visiting existing facilities, like pharmacies, to get vaccines for things like flu, pneumonia, or shingles. We support efforts to use existing vaccinators to help get COVID-19 vaccines to more people quickly. At the same time, we support expanding access through mass vaccination centers and utilizing mobile clinics – especially in areas with few health providers – as well as developing new, critical modes of providing in-home vaccination to home-bound individuals.

Vaccines only work if people can get them, which is why Congress, the Administration, and State Governments must move quickly to help people find a vaccine provider and make an appointment. Many older Americans do not have access to the internet or do not have experience using online appointment systems. While the process varies across states and even counties, older people in many jurisdictions are forced to visit multiple websites just to monitor appointment availability. In addition to efforts to centralize appointments to a single website in each state, we urge the federal government to work with states to develop 1-800 numbers for scheduling vaccine appointments that are well-staffed, have reserved appointments for phone users unable to use the internet, and offer culturally competent customer service in several languages. It is also critical that additional efforts be undertaken to reduce vaccine hesitancy, including amongst those who work in long-term care. Information should be communicated in a culturally competent manner and should address each communities' specific concerns and needs.

### **Direct Payment Relief from Economic Shocks**

We continue to support direct cash payments to provide financial relief to individuals whether working, unable to work, unemployed, or retired. AARP is especially pleased this proposal ends the discriminatory treatment of people who care for adult dependents. They deserve the same treatment as households with children, although previous stimulus payments excluded those families from additional assistance. Finally, we support language in the proposal to ensure people receiving Social Security, SSI, SSDI, and Veterans Affairs payments who do not file federal income taxes will continue to automatically receive direct payments without the undue burden of filing paperwork or entering into an online portal.

### **Nursing Homes, Other Long-Term Care Facilities, and Home and Community-Based Services**

Over 170,000 residents and staff of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities have died from COVID-19, about 40 percent of all COVID-19 deaths nationwide to date. This is nothing short of a national disgrace. The package will take important steps to support staffing needs when there is a COVID-19 outbreak as well as support greater infection control. While vaccinations are occurring for residents and staff of long-term care facilities, it may still be months before all residents and staff who so choose will be vaccinated. Ongoing infection control efforts are vital. AARP supports the funding included for infection control support in skilled nursing facilities. In addition, AARP also supports funding for Elder Justice Act programs to help better address and crack down on elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

The heroes who come to work every day to care for our loved ones in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities deserve not only our thanks, but decent wages and working conditions. Across the country, we have seen that higher staffing levels are associated with fewer deaths and COVID-19 cases in nursing homes. We support funding in the package for state strike teams in skilled nursing facilities and nursing facilities. AARP further urges Congress to take immediate action to ensure that staffing levels in these facilities are adequate, such as through pay and other compensation, paid leave, recruitment, training, retention, and strike teams to provide additional support to facilities with COVID-19 cases.

The devastating impacts of COVID-19 on long-term care facility residents further demonstrate the need for greater investments in home and community-based services (HCBS). AARP supports the investments in this package that will allow more people to get care at home and stay out of nursing homes when they so choose. These policies not only meet consumer preferences and save lives, but they can save taxpayer money. For each person getting nursing home care, Medicaid can fund three people getting HCBS. AARP supports the 7.35% enhanced FMAP for Medicaid HCBS to help ensure access to these vital services. Congress must make funding for HCBS a higher priority.

Additionally, we support funding in the package to continue and strengthen critical programs for older adults – including caregiver support, evidence-based health promotion and disease prevention, and home and community-based services, including COVID-19 vaccination support and addressing social isolation – under the Older Americans Act.

### **Further Investments in Federal Nutrition Programs**

This pandemic has devastated many American families, and we are seeing unbelievable numbers of older Americans going hungry. More than 20 percent of people age 50 to 59 and 14 percent of Americans age 60 and older are struggling to put food on the table. Throughout the pandemic, an additional 8 million people have needed to enroll in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for food assistance. For older people scrambling to make ends meet, this help is a much-needed lifeline. SNAP is also an important strategy for helping people achieve better health and reducing the risk of hospitalization. Further, these benefits can be an important stimulus to support local businesses. AARP supports the proposal to extend the 15 percent SNAP benefit increase. We also support the additional administrative funding to continue support for people in need and additional funding to support improvements to help people buy groceries online.

With Older Americans Act nutrition services providing more meals to more people, AARP supports the inclusion of \$750 million in emergency funding to help the aging network meet the needs of seniors so they can continue to stay safe and healthy at home. Many people are also continuing to turn to food banks as a vital lifeline. Therefore, we urge Congress to include funding for The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) to ensure food banks can provide emergency hunger relief to people in need.

## **Health Care Access and Affordability**

Access to affordable health care is more important than ever. Unfortunately, as a result of the pandemic, many older workers have lost not only their jobs, but their health insurance as well. Recent U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data show that the long-term unemployment rate for jobseekers age 55 and older is 45.5 percent – up from 19.7 percent in February 2020. For those older Americans who do have insurance, out-of-pocket costs continue to rise out of control and put health care out of reach. A recent AARP report shows that over 40 percent of all older adults in the individual market have coverage that can be considered “unaffordable” based on how much of their income goes toward premiums and out-of-pocket costs. This is particularly true for adults age 50 to 64 with incomes right above the Affordable Care Act threshold for premium tax credits, exacerbated by the fact that there is no limit on how much premiums can consume of their income. Millions of older adults remain uninsured, including many not eligible for premium assistance. We are pleased the package includes an the expansion of subsidies through the next two years to help individuals purchase affordable qualified health plans, including for those not currently eligible for this financial assistance. We also support the COBRA subsidies that will enable laid-off or furloughed workers to remain on employer provided health insurance, if available, through the end of the current fiscal year.

AARP also supports the effort to strengthen Medicaid. AARP has worked for years to encourage states to allow their eligible residents to get covered, and we support the five percent increase in a state’s FMAP for those who expand Medicaid. We also support removing the cap on the amount of rebate that prescription drug manufacturers must pay to the Medicaid program if they increase the price of their drugs beyond the rate of inflation in a given year. This is an important effort to protect taxpayer dollars from subsidizing high prescription drug prices.

## **Emergency Paid Family and Sick Leave**

AARP supports the continuation of emergency paid sick and family leave. In 2020, family caregivers were not adequately covered by the emergency paid family and sick leave because caregivers were provided access to less paid leave than others. Individuals caring for adult loved ones affected by the coronavirus were ineligible for emergency paid family leave. Allowing these caregivers to be eligible for paid family leave would greatly alleviate the enormous pressure that millions of Americans are currently facing as they choose between the health of a loved one or going to work. We support the extension of emergency paid leave provisions to family caregivers.

## **Age Discrimination**

Age discrimination in the labor force remains pervasive. AARP research has found that 3 in 5 older workers report they’ve seen or experienced age discrimination on the job, with higher percentages of women and people of color reporting it as a problem. Nearly two-thirds of women and more than three-fourths of African American workers age 45 and older say they’ve seen or experienced age discrimination in the workplace. Age discrimination on the job is bad enough, but age discrimination in the law is worse. AARP strongly supports the elimination of the

arbitrary age limit in the Earned Income Tax Credit, which has for decades prevented low-wage workers over the age of 65 from receiving a critical financial support offered to younger workers.

### **Financial Support for Unemployed Older Workers**

Millions of Americans, including many older Americans, remain unemployed and need additional financial relief. We support the continuation of emergency unemployment benefits, including the extension of additional categories of eligibility and the additional benefit amounts for those workers who remain jobless. At the same time, we recognize that current unemployment programs have made it difficult for many qualifying individuals to access the benefits they need, while rewarding too many fraudulent claims. We support efforts to address both of these challenges.

### **Housing and Transportation**

We continue to be concerned about the ability of homeowners and renters to maintain their housing while absorbing the economic stresses unique to this pandemic. The public health injunction to shelter in place makes this even more pressing. Nearly 10 million older adult households were cost-burdened in 2017 and half of these were severely cost-burdened. We support the additional funding for emergency rental assistance and eviction prevention, not only to protect individual renters and homeowners and their families, but to help ensure the sustainability of our nation's affordable housing infrastructure.

Further, we support emergency transit funding, to ensure that publicly supported transit systems successfully emerge from these crisis conditions. Public transportation is a vital component of livable communities and of our transportation system, providing connections to health care, jobs, and family. However, under the current restrictions, transit agencies are struggling to maintain operations.

### **Pension Relief**

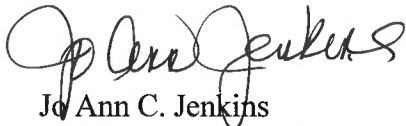
Nearly 10 million workers and retirees are covered by jointly sponsored multiemployer retirement plans. While most of these plans are well funded, a smaller percentage have been struggling. AARP supports federal assistance to help seriously underfunded multiemployer pension plan participants. Hundreds of thousands of workers who have earned retirement benefits did not know their employers failed to make adequate plan contributions. Now, many industries are struggling, and employers are often no longer in business, and retired workers and their families face benefit cuts and impoverished retirement years. Federal assistance should help improve plan funding and management and provide workers and retirees their earned pensions. In addition, we support an increase in the premiums paid to the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC), which will soon run short of adequate funding, to ensure the PBGC can continue to protect the earned benefits of workers and their families.

AARP again thanks Congress for their continuing work to address the COVID-19 pandemic. Our members and all older Americans have been gravely impacted by this virus. We have lost so many loved ones, and the human toll will be felt in our families and communities for decades to

come. We urge Congress to swiftly pass additional COVID relief which includes key priorities for older Americans. If you have any questions, please contact Bill Sweeney on our Government Affairs team at [bsweeney@aarpp.org](mailto:bsweeney@aarpp.org) or 202-434-3750.

While this virus continues to devastate so many lives, we remain hopeful that an end will soon be in sight.

Sincerely,



Jo Ann C. Jenkins  
Chief Executive Officer