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House of Representatives

The House was not in session today. Its next meeting will be held on Monday, March 23, 2020, at 11:30 a.m.

Senate

SATURDAY, MARCH 21, 2020

The Senate met at 12 noon and was called to order by the President pro tempore (Mr. GRASSLEY).

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

Eternal Father, answer us speedily when we don't know which way to turn. Guide us with Your light when we cannot see the way.

Do not hide Your face from our lawmakers as they seek to do Your will, for in the time of trouble, You continue to hide us in Your pavilion. Lord, teach our Senators how to live in a way that will honor You.

We magnify Your Name for the way You have preserved our Nation through the seasons of its existence. You have made us glad, for You are our light and salvation.

We pray in Your glorious Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The President pro tempore led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. ROUNDS). The Senator from Iowa.

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak in morning business for 1 minute.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

SENATE LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, I am leading negotiations on tax and healthcare issues as part of the third phase of economic relief to help workers, families, and small businesses. We have been working through tough issues, and we must do it in short order.

The American people need Congress to put partisan politics aside and provide them relief as quickly as possible to get the economy turned around, and we must demand this of ourselves as well.

Our multifaceted approach includes recovery checks to Americans, enhanced unemployment insurance, and much needed resources for our healthcare system. This is just one piece of the Senate's comprehensive package; in other words, there are a lot of other Senators who are working in separate arenas to accomplish in that area what I am trying to accomplish through the Finance Committee.

I hope that Democrats and my colleagues in the House of Representatives will work with us to pass our relief package as quickly as possible. This requires all hands on deck.

From what I just said, you might draw the conclusion that fighting this virus pandemic is going to be just a role for the Congress of the United States, as important as that role is, but also, as you read how people are responding, we have to thank a lot of private large and small businesses that we read about that are stepping into this abyss that we call the pandemic.

While we are wringing our hands—and we all ought to be wringing our

hands—you read about manufacturing plants of different varieties all over the country converting production to badly needed hospital supplies and testing supplies. You not only read that in the United States of America but you also read about President Macron of France saying that we are in a war-like environment—all joining together to produce these badly needed hospital supplies and testing supplies. You read about the German Chancellor calling unemployed people out to help with harvest because workers who normally come in can't cross borders there.

So we here in Washington might think the only reaction to the pandemic we are in is only something we can do in Congress, as important as that is, but it is also very important that we recognize that there are a lot of people out there in our private sector doing what entrepreneurs normally do—coming to the rescue—and they need to be thanked and recognized as well.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Democratic leader is recognized.

• This "bullet" symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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SENATE LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, negotiations on the third phase of the coronavirus legislation went late into the night last night and will continue through the day today.

I have spoken to Speaker PELOSI and Secretary Mnuchin several times, as well as President Trump, to keep them apprised as we continue the work through a number of issues. In fact, I just had a very good, very detailed phone call with Secretary Mnuchin—or “Steve and Chuck,” as he prefers to call it. We discussed many of the outstanding issues, and we are making very good progress. I have every expectation that this progress will continue throughout the day. Democratic negotiators will meet with their Republican counterparts throughout the day to continue hammering out the details.

The Senate is here, we are working, and we are all eager to come to a bipartisan agreement as soon as humanly possible.

There are still a number of priorities that Democrats continue to fight for in the package that is now being assembled.

As I have made clear, Democrats have two primary goals, broadly defined, in this next phase of coronavirus legislation. One is to address the impending public health crisis head-on with a massive infusion of resources to our hospitals, our medical facilities, and our other public health infrastructure. The second priority is to put workers first. In fact, our proposal, which we laid out as early as Monday, is entitled “Workers First.”

Democrats want to do as much as possible to prepare our healthcare system, and we want to give Americans who are most immediately affected by the economic slowdown ample relief so they can weather the storm over the long haul. So, on healthcare, Democrats are fighting for a Marshall Plan for our public health infrastructure.

We need hundreds of billions of dollars for ventilators, testing equipment, gloves, masks, ICU beds, and PPE, or personal protective equipment, for our frontline medical workers.

I spoke to the head of the nurses union in New York yesterday. They are short of masks. These brave nurses are going to work, doing their job, but they don't have the right equipment that they need.

Money must go to our hospitals and our nursing homes, our community health centers, and our State and local governments. This can neither wait for a future bill nor a supplemental package. We need it right now, not 2 weeks from now.

A senior doctor at Maimonides hospital in Brooklyn, NY, wrote to me yesterday. Here is what the doctor said:

I'm writing to you in a move of desperation. Currently, we have severe shortages in the basic necessities needed to fight the disease and protect health care workers. Disposable masks and gowns are in such short

supply, we re-use them until they fall apart. We don't have adequate supplies of supportive medicines. Beds, ventilators, nurses and critical care doctors are also needed. We need a national response to this disease.

I urge my colleagues to hear the urgency and strain in this brave doctor's voice, the desperation in his warning. If we don't provide these resources right now, what is already a dire situation will—not could—become catastrophic. It will affect hospitals everywhere: big-city hospitals, medium-sized suburban hospitals, and small rural hospitals. Many of them will go under in a short period of time.

So we need a Marshall Plan for our public health infrastructure, and it must be in this legislation, in the opinion of the Democratic caucus.

As we have made clear from the beginning, we must also put workers first. That means a dramatic expansion and reform of unemployment insurance. We need unemployment insurance on steroids. Some are calling it “employment insurance.” It must be easier to access. It must cover many more Americans during this crisis, including Americans who have nontraditional employment.

It must provide more generous benefits. Workers who are laid off should receive a paycheck equal to what they were receiving while employed. Workers must be protected, whether they work for businesses small, medium, or large.

The plan we have would allow them to get unemployment insurance quickly. They would be furloughed. So they would stay as employees—even though they weren't working—of their employer, so that when, God-willing, this crisis ends, they can go back to their employer and the businesses that are now closed and decimated can start running again.

We propose that this be not just a one-shot deal but a paycheck every work period, and it should go for as long as the crisis lasts. We want to fund it for at least 4 months, maybe 6. If the crisis ends more quickly, of course, we might be able to terminate it, but we need to give the workers of America the assurance that they will have paychecks. The same amount of resources that they had before this crisis they should have now, and it will occur ongoing until we beat this horrible disease.

There are other things we must do for American families as well. We should greatly expand paid sick leave and family leave. We need to expand food assistance. The kids who go to school get their best meals, many of them, at the school lunch or school breakfast. They need to be fed. Others who lose work, they need food help right away.

I believe our students are under strain. Many of their colleges are gone. Those who have just gotten out of school have difficult employment possibilities. We should cancel student loan payments during the course of the crisis, both principal and interest.

I spoke to the President about this yesterday. He said he was sympathetic. He said at the podium yesterday that interest payments he would cancel, but I think we need to do more.

We also must rescue small and medium-sized businesses with a generous loan program, so long as they protect their workers. They have other expenses. We will take care of their workers under the expanded unemployment program and on the small business program, but they have other expenses. We don't want them going under when these are good, ongoing businesses that did nothing wrong. They have to come back. So small business really needs help.

And, if we are going to bail out any industry, particularly the big companies, we have to include strict conditions that put workers first: no layoffs, no salary cuts for workers or salary increases for corporate executives, guarantees that workers be rehired at their previous wages once the crisis abates, and no stock buybacks.

I have heard the President mention that he is against stock buybacks in the past. So when I called him yesterday, I said: Make it clear. It is not in the bill that has been put before us, but Democrats will insist that it be in any proposal once we come together in a bipartisan way, as we are doing now.

Democrats have several other priorities, as well, and we are working through each of them with our Republican colleagues even as we speak. As I said, I had a wonderful—well, I had a very good—conversation. I will not go too far, but I had a very good conversation with Secretary Mnuchin, and we are making good progress on many of the issues that we Democrats feel are important.

One other need, by the way—because we do have other needs—is that I want to emphasize that one of the issues that is quickly emerging is that State and local governments are running out of cash and may soon be broke. Governors, mayors, county executives, county officials, town officials—Democratic and Republican alike—are clamoring for help. We must provide it. They are on the frontlines.

So, in conclusion, I have no illusions about the difficulty of putting together legislation this momentous in this short a period of time, but all parties are working in good faith and as fast as possible to see that we accomplish the task at hand.

Of course, far greater than our challenges here in Congress are the challenges that now confront the American people. Working families are at home without a paycheck, with no knowledge of when the next one might arrive. Small businesses are watching the labor of their lives teeter on the brink of collapse.

I spoke to a small business owner. He had spent 8 years getting his business to be successful. It just had begun to be that way, and now his doors are closed and his employees are furloughed. We have to help people like that.