

once again come together and work together to pass another round of help. We have done it before, and we did it when case counts were far lower than they are now.

We need to summon the same sense of urgency, and we must come together at the end of this week and pass meaningful bipartisan and comprehensive COVID relief. We must prove to the American people that bipartisan negotiation is not a relic of the past.

As I talk to Michiganders each and every day, the message is very clear. They want us to put partisan politics aside and solve the very real challenges confronting our country.

Finding common ground and bringing people together has always been my approach to serving Michigan and the people of this Nation. This past year, I am proud to say, we worked together to advance legislation on priorities that not only addressed the pandemic but also tackled issues facing Michiganders and people across this country each and every day.

On a bipartisan basis, we have been able to pass legislation out of Congress on a number of topics, whether it has been expanding apprenticeship opportunities for veterans, closing loopholes that pose a threat to our national security, saving taxpayer dollars, protecting the Great Lakes, which is one of our Nation's most precious natural resources, hiring more agricultural inspectors at our Nation's ports of entry, or improving the Department of Veterans Affairs caregiver program.

I want to take this opportunity to thank my colleagues on both sides of the aisle for their partnership with me in advancing these priorities. I know there is no shortage of differences among us, but when we put personal politics aside and focus on addressing the problem at hand, I know we can get results.

As we enter this next session of Congress, I am hopeful that we can build on some of the progress we have made. Whether it is supporting small businesses, lowering prescription drug costs, ensuring our Nation remains a global leader in innovation, or getting through this public health and economic crisis, there is much more that can be done in the next Congress when we are all willing to reach across the aisle to find lasting solutions.

Two years ago, I delivered George Washington's Farewell Address on the Senate floor. It is an annual tradition here in the Senate. In that address, President Washington warned of the dangers of tribalism and political polarization in our country. We cannot forget President Washington's message, particularly during these uncertain and daunting times. We cannot let polarization prevent us from doing the people's work. Let us build on that spirit of bipartisanship. Let us work together to get things done. Our constituents demand it.

This week, we can again work in a bipartisan way to pass a COVID relief

bill that makes a difference to everyone suffering from this pandemic.

I yield the floor.

VOTE ON SOMERS NOMINATION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the Somers nomination?

Mr. PETERS. Mr. President, I ask for the yeas and nays.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there a sufficient second?

There appears to be a sufficient second.

The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk called the roll.

Mr. THUNE. The following Senators are necessarily absent: the Senator from Wyoming (Mr. ENZI), the Senator from Nebraska (Mrs. FISCHER), the Senator from Georgia (Mrs. LOEFFLER), and the Senator from Georgia (Mr. PERDUE).

Mr. DURBIN. I announce that the Senator from California (Ms. HARRIS) is necessarily absent.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SCOTT of Florida). Are there any other Senators in the Chamber desiring to vote?

The result was announced—yeas 52, nays 43, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 274 Ex.]

YEAS—52

Alexander	Graham	Romney
Barrasso	Grassley	Rounds
Blackburn	Hawley	Rubio
Blunt	Hoeven	Sasse
Boozman	Hyde-Smith	Scott (FL)
Braun	Inhofe	Scott (SC)
Burr	Johnson	Shelby
Capito	Kelly	Sinema
Cassidy	Kennedy	Sullivan
Collins	Lankford	Tester
Cornyn	Lee	Thune
Cotton	McConnell	Tillis
Cramer	Moran	Toomey
Crapo	Murkowski	Whitehouse
Cruz	Paul	Wicker
Daines	Portman	Young
Ernst	Risch	
Gardner	Roberts	

NAYS—43

Baldwin	Hassan	Reed
Bennet	Heinrich	Rosen
Blumenthal	Hirono	Sanders
Booker	Jones	Schatz
Brown	Kaine	Schumer
Cantwell	King	Shaheen
Cardin	Klobuchar	Smith
Carper	Leahy	Stabenow
Casey	Manchin	Udall
Coons	Markey	Van Hollen
Cortez Masto	Menendez	Warner
Duckworth	Merkley	Warren
Durbin	Murphy	Wyden
Feinstein	Murray	
Gillibrand	Peters	

NOT VOTING—5

Enzi	Harris	Perdue
Fischer	Loeffler	

The nomination was confirmed.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Ohio.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. PORTMAN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to legislative session and be in

a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

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

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. PORTMAN. Mr. President, I am here on the floor today to talk again about the need for us to pass a legislative package, which I would call an emergency package, to deal with our COVID-19 crisis we have in this country.

As we talk today on the floor of the Senate, there are negotiators working busily in a room nearby to try to come up with that package, and that is a good thing. I know they have run into some roadblocks, at least so I have been told. We need to work through those roadblocks. They are relatively small compared to the importance of the overall mission of helping the people we represent, helping those small businesses, helping those hospitals, helping those families who find themselves without a paycheck through no fault of their own. And my hope is that we can get there.

The legislation that is being looked at today, which may be part of a larger package that we will vote on either tomorrow or the next day, is, as I understand it, informed by work that a bipartisan group of us did over the past several weeks. I appreciate my colleagues so much. I see Senator MURKOWSKI is here on the floor today. She was one of those people. Senator MANCHIN was one of the people to help organize it. In fact, I think the first meeting was because LISA MURKOWSKI invited people to have pizza at her place. And that resulted in a very positive interaction between Democrats and Republicans on a lot of detail, a lot of specific issues, to be able to put together a package that will help our country right now to work through this crisis.

I wish I could say that things are better. But when I look at my own home State of Ohio, I see just the opposite. In fact, over the past few weeks, we have had weekly cases that have increased, not decreased. Our number of daily new cases is averaging around 10,000 a day now every day. That is double what it was just a month ago. At least in my State, the coronavirus crisis has increased, not decreased.

By the same token, the economic crisis that is a result of the COVID-19 crisis has continued to grow. We have seen people who have lost their jobs because their restaurant doesn't have any business, not because there is a government edict; although, there are in some States. Some States have said you have to shut down. Some States have gone so far as to say you have to shut down outdoor dining, not just indoor dining. Of course, those people have lost their jobs.

In many cases, it is just because the virus is so prevalent, people aren't

going out; they aren't going shopping; they aren't going to the movie theater; they aren't going to the bowling alley; they aren't going to the restaurant; and they aren't going to the hotels. Folks are losing their jobs. Again, not because of something they did or something they could control. It is almost like a natural disaster, and, therefore, they need some help and need it now.

We really have kind of a K-shaped recovery here. People talk about a V-shaped recovery, where you have a recession and you come right back out the same way you went in. I wish that were the case here. Instead, it is kind of K-shaped. We do have some industries that are doing quite well, actually. In some areas of the country, they are doing OK. That is the top of the K. But the bottom of the K is those who are not. If you are in the hospitality business, the travel business, if you are someone who has a job that is no longer there because of this crisis, then you are in trouble. You are in trouble.

I am told that I have now given 20 floor speeches on the need for us to do something. I think it ought to be targeted. I think it ought to be focused. What I have said is that we have this wonderful new vaccine coming out. Moderna is about to be approved, I believe. Pfizer was just approved. I am in a trial for the Janssen, J&J—Johnson & Johnson—vaccine, actually. I think that is coming along well. We will probably have AstraZeneca coming soon.

This is something that is very positive about this crisis. We actually finally have something that can help us turn the corner. I think it is important that we wear our masks. I think it is important that we social distance. I think it is important that we use the hand sanitizer—all of that. We need to keep doing it. But the difference between that and the vaccine is that the vaccine gives you the immunity we are all seeking. People talk about herd immunity and that that could come—early on people said—by so many people getting infected. We can't have that happen. Why? Because that will lead to a lot of pain, a lot more deaths. Three hundred thousand people have already died in this country from this crisis. We don't want to bring herd immunity in that way. We want to bring herd immunity from the vaccine.

By the way, these vaccines are safe. They are effective. I mean, if you look at the numbers, 95 percent efficacy—unbelievable. Do your own research and look at it and make your own decision, but this is not a situation where, as with the flu, actually—when you take the flu shot, I am told, only about one-third of the time does it work and about two-thirds of the time it doesn't. That has happened to my family members, probably to you or your family members, where you take a flu shot, and it doesn't really help. But here, 90, 95 percent, 98 percent—the numbers are amazing. Take a look at them—“efficacy,” meaning that is how effective

they are. Again, in the trial that I am in, the initial numbers are quite positive.

Also, it was done in a way that I think makes a lot of sense for the future in terms of public-private partnership. The government basically said to these companies that we will provide a market for you if you get busy producing this lifesaving vaccine. By the way, you can go ahead and start producing the vaccine, even before it is approved so we don't have to wait 4, 5 months after an approval to then get the production up and going. If you don't get the approval, we are going to throw away the vaccine.

It was worth doing. It was probably the best expenditure of Federal money we had here in the last package, the CARES package, because it ensured that we not only would get these vaccines quickly, but we would get them distributed quickly. As an example, even while the vaccines were being approved recently—and these were the Pfizer vaccines—those vaccines were already on their way to my home State of Ohio. They were pre-positioned there. And when the approval came, we could move quickly. People are being vaccinated today in my State and in your State—primarily, people who are on the frontlines as healthcare providers.

Next, we are helping with the nursing homes, people who come in and out of the nursing homes, which is where, obviously, most of this disease happens, and then the people in the nursing homes, then our EMS and other first responders, people who have health problems, preconditions that make them more vulnerable to the virus, seniors. This is really exciting. This is the answer. This is what is going to help us turn the tide, but that is going to be a ways off until that is widely available.

What I think, in terms of this package, again—I think of it as a bridge. It is an emergency package to get us from where we are now to this period probably in the March, April, May time period, when the vaccine will be widely available, and we will be able to have that kind of herd immunity we talked about earlier. We don't want community spread. We want community immunity. And that is the idea.

The package that the bipartisan group put together was \$908 billion. Six of the ten of us voted for that. All of us voted for a smaller package, which was \$748 billion. It is important to note that of that \$908 billion, or \$748 billion, we also repurposed a lot of money that has already been spent. So, roughly, \$600 billion was pulled back from the PPP program that had not been spent yet and also from a Trump program that the Treasury and the Fed had to provide loans that were not being used. That is the 13(3) Program you might have heard about. That program, fortunately, was not tapped into because the commercial bank stepped in and provided a lot of that lending that was necessary. Rates are at historic lows

right now for mortgages, as an example, and other loans, so they didn't need to step in. That money is being repurposed. So, instead of \$748 billion, it is more like \$148 billion; instead of \$908 billion, if you went for the whole thing, it is more like \$300 billion—not that that is not a lot of money. It is. But compare that to what was being talked about only a couple of weeks ago and for the previous 9 months, by the way, which was a package in the House of Representatives, called the Heroes Act, which was trillions of dollars—\$3.5 trillion, initially, and then they agreed, maybe, \$2.4 trillion. I think the last offer that was on the table that they didn't take was \$1.8 trillion. We are not talking about those kind of numbers now. We are talking about a bridge, on an emergency basis. It is targeted and focused. I will give you an example of that.

In this package—the bipartisan package, which I hope is picked up, and I think it will be by the package that the final negotiators are working on. That would be Secretary Mnuchin, who has been very eager to get an agreement that helps the American people, working for the President, but also the leadership here—the Democratic leader, the Republican leader, and in the House, the Democratic leader, the Speaker, and the Republican leader. That is the group right now. What they are saying is, we want to get a package done. I think, as an example, with the PPP program, they will end up picking up what this bipartisan group agreed to, which is to have a more narrow Paycheck Protection Program, PPP, to help small businesses but to particularly focus on those businesses that are small businesses, instead of under 500 as an example, maybe 300 people, and those that are really hurting; in other words, those that are losing money relative to where they were last year. When you do a quarter-to-quarter comparison—fourth quarter this year, fourth quarter back in 2019—if you have a loss, let's say, of 25 percent or 30 percent, that is significant. With the funding that we have, isn't it better to target that funding toward those small businesses that are really hurting? That, I think, will be in the final package.

Again, I commend my bipartisan colleagues for coming up with some of these ideas and working out some of this stuff because there are some differences. By the way, no one of the 10 of us involved in this thing, agreed with every part of this package, trust me.

I would have written a different package, as any of my colleagues would have, but it was necessary to get to yes, to get to a result. We have done that and, I think, again, it will inform where we end up in terms of the package coming to the floor.

The Paycheck Protection Program is a good example of that. We also provided in that program loan forgiveness for small loans—\$150,000 or less—in a

very simplified manner, so you wouldn't have to go through all the bureaucracy and the costs and the hoops and the hoops, which small businesses just can't afford to do. So I am proud of our work there as well.

We also provided help to some of the hardest hit industries, including the airline industry. We want to keep a viable airline industry in this country. We don't want them to go bankrupt and planes to stop flying. We actually want, over this bridge period—between now and, as I mentioned, March, April, May—to be sure that the economy can get back on its feet as quickly as possible. That is why we don't want these small businesses to go out of business and their employees to be put on the unemployment lines. That is why we want to be sure our airlines can continue. They are having a tough time. But 90,000 jobs alone in this industry will be lost, we are told, unless we do something along the lines we did in the bipartisan package—90,000 additional jobs lost. We don't want that. We want to be sure we are positioned for growth.

By the way, in my view—for whatever it is worth—I think this economy is incredibly resilient. I know it is not going great right now. We still have 10 million people out of work who were working as of February of this year. We have 10 million people who haven't found their way back to work yet. We still have relatively high unemployment compared to where we were. In my State, it is about double where it was. But we have been resilient, given what we have been hit with. I believe that if we can get to this period of time where we have the vaccine readily available, we are poised for a takeoff.

I think there is pent-up demand. Among my constituents, they are going to be happy to get out and shop again—to go to the restaurants and go to the hotels, to travel, to go to the movie theaters and go to the stages, the places where there is a performance that has to be canceled now and where people are struggling to keep these venues open. Those will not just be reopened. People, I think, will flock there. We have to get through to that period.

In my view, it is worth helping to ensure that in the interim period, we don't have even more pain and more loss in jobs and are prepared to move forward.

On unemployment insurance, again, if you lost your job, not because of what you did but because of what I said earlier—almost like a natural disaster of the virus—we should provide additional help. We do that in the legislation.

The day after Christmas, the current relief ends in terms of the Federal help and unemployment insurance. That is not something that any of us should want to see. If you are self-employed, if you are a so-called gig economy worker, then, you are able to get unemployment insurance right now if you don't have a job. If you can't work because of

this virus, you can get unemployment insurance. That is not typical in my State, and it is not typical in most States.

But because of the Federal law we passed, the CARES Act—again, 9 months ago—that is permitted, but it ends the day after Christmas. I have people self-employed coming up to me back home saying: I have to know. I don't know if I can pay the rent. I don't know if I can make a car payment. I need to know. I don't know if I can make my mortgage.

We are going to tell them, I hope, in this legislation that passes that, indeed, they are going to get the coverage. And the 13 weeks of the Federal extension on the State unemployment will also be extended so that the day after Christmas, again, people aren't falling off the cliff.

Again, the Federal supplement per week originally was \$600 per week, as you know. That \$600 per week, I thought, was relatively high, meaning that many people were getting more on unemployment than they were in their jobs. That was a problem for many employers, typically small employers that had a tough time getting people to come back to work. As the economy started to improve after the March, April, May time period, when things started to pick up a little bit, it was tough.

This compromise, I think, will be \$300. Maybe it will be \$200. I don't know what exactly they are working out. Our proposal was \$300, which is a bipartisan compromise. Many Democrats would like to go back to the \$600. Some Republicans think it should be less than \$300. But this is a compromise, and it is a way for us to ensure that during this time period—and this is for 16 weeks only, so between now and the end of March—on this bridge that we talked about, if people are unemployed through no fault of their own, they should be able to get a little bit to be able to put food on the table, make the car payment, make the rent. That is in this package, too.

There is also funding in here for rental assistance. As you know, some people have been hanging on wondering if they are going to be evicted or not. Evictions make no sense right now for the tenants or the landlords or the economy. We don't want people out on the street. Landlords don't want to go through the pain of having to go through an eviction and trying to find somebody else. They can get some help just to hold on during this period. There is funding in rental assistance to help keep people in their homes with a roof over their head as we go through this period.

The final one I want to talk about—and there are a lot of other provisions here that I don't have time to go into. What I want to talk about is one that is a heartbreaker for me. For many years now, we have been challenged with this drug addiction issue, particularly opioids. It is prescription drugs

and heroin and fentanyl, the deadly synthetic opioid—to the point that only 4 years ago, we had the highest rates of overdose deaths in the history of our country. Seventy-two thousand people were dying a year. A lot of us focused on that year.

For the past 4 or 5 years, this Congress spent money and changed policies to help people get treatment and get into longer term recovery. More money went into prevention activities to keep people from getting into the funnel of addiction, in the first place. This was at epidemic levels.

In 2018 and 2019, we started to see a reversal of that for the first time in really 3 decades. Every year—for something like 30 years—in my home State of Ohio, we would see more overdose deaths every year—every year. In 2018, we had a 20-plus percent reduction in overdose deaths. It was about a 22-percent reduction in Ohio—a 22-percent reduction of deaths. That is because we all focused at the Federal level, State level, and local level, and we made a difference.

We began to change this dynamic of young people and middle-aged people and across the spectrum. Regardless of the ZIP Code you lived in, you were being affected by this. We changed it so that people were actually getting the help they needed, getting out from under their addiction, getting back to work and back to their families. It was good news. The heartbreaking part of this for me is that, having made that progress, finally, we now see, during this coronavirus pandemic, an epidemic underneath it. It is the epidemic of drug addiction.

There are new numbers out today that I saw that don't surprise me as much as they discourage me, which is that, this year, instead of 72,000 people dying of overdose deaths in America from drug abuse—this is not just opioids but all drugs, including psychostimulants, like methamphetamine; crystal meth from Mexico that is cheap, powerful, deadly—this year, it is expected that our overdose death rate will be the highest ever. We are getting back to where we were. Plus—83,000 is the number I saw today. Remember, I mentioned 72,000 people dying only 4 years ago. Now we are back to 83,000. This is a crisis within a pandemic, and we need to deal with it.

There are lots of different opinions out there as to why this is happening. I believe strongly a lot of this is just from the isolation that comes from this pandemic. People haven't been able to go and meet with and talk to their recovery coaches, which is one of the ways that we were changing this dynamic. People were able to meet with people who were recovering addicts themselves to help them get through it. It was working for a lot of people.

Yet at some of these longer term recovery places where people can be—say a home, a sober home—they had issues with the pandemic and have not been

able to have the group homes provide that care.

Also, people have not been able just to go see their doctors or their treatment providers. Telemedicine has helped. That is one reason in our package that we put more funding into telemedicine, because that is a way you can get to people. Both in regard to behavioral health, mental health issues, and with regard to addiction, it hasn't filled the gap.

Also, a lot of people are feeling a great deal of stress and even despair and joblessness. And, obviously, if you go to the food banks in Ohio, you see people who are in their cars waiting for 3, 4, 5, 6 hours at times. There is something going on here, folks. These are people who are feeling desperation. To wait in line for 6 hours to get a box of food means that you have a real problem in your family.

By the way, some of these people—because I talked to people who have gone to these food banks—have never been in a food bank in their lives. They found themselves in a tough situation.

Again, it is not everybody. Remember the K-shaped recovery? For some people, it has been fine. If you are a white collar worker and you can telework from home virtually—maybe you are in the finance industry or maybe you are in the tech industry—you might be doing great. But your neighbor who has a job at that restaurant or perhaps in another business like the travel business or the motor-coach business, they don't have the opportunities to get that job. They are the ones in the food bank line.

By the way, putting more funding into the food banks, as well as into helping people to be able to afford food, is, obviously, a big issue right now.

The notion here is that, with this legislation, we are going to provide more help for people who are suffering from addiction, with the thought of trying all we can to try to reverse this trend.

Ultimately, again, the best way to reverse it is to have this coronavirus pandemic behind us so that people can socialize again and gather again and aren't feeling the despair, aren't isolated. And that is coming.

But the bridge to there is important so we save as many lives as we can. There is \$5 billion in our legislation—the bipartisan bill—to do just that. My hope is, again, that that will be in the final package, and I believe it will be. I believe that what the negotiators are working on is very similar to what is in the legislation that we came together with as a bipartisan group.

My only disappointment in the group is that we couldn't end up with this combination of State and local funding—targeted toward need, by the way, not the way it was done last time, per capita, but targeted for need—and liability protection for these small businesses, for these private nursing homes, for these EMS personnel, for emergency medical people who are concerned. They are concerned about it.

What we tried to put together was a package that said: OK, if you are a bad actor, if you didn't follow the rules—and the rules were pretty clear—you aren't protected. You are accountable.

But if you followed the rules, and you were trying your best to deal with ever-changing standards—and, let's face it; they have been quite different. Remember back in March and April, people were saying: Don't wear a mask. Now, of course, we know that was a mistake. At the time, we didn't. The notion is to protect people from frivolous lawsuits who were doing their best.

By the way, there was a survey done of people saying: Do you think there should be protection for people who are doing their best, whereas people who are grossly negligent—that was the word used, "gross negligence"—would not be protected; they would be accountable? And 79 percent of the American people agreed with that.

There has also been polling out there with regard to small businesses, from the NFIB, saying that 70 percent of small businesses are very concerned and worried about this. Again, think of the business. Revenue has crashed. Profits have crashed. They are hanging on. The PPP is going to help them because we are getting more PPP. The Paycheck Protection Program, which we talked about earlier, will help to get them through this.

If they are facing a lawsuit—whether they win it or not, whether they can prove that they were doing the right thing—just the cost of that lawsuit could well be the difference of that small business continuing operations or not.

Nonprofits. The nonprofits in Ohio are very interested in the liability reforms, as are the education community—the higher ed people, the school teachers—as are people in the healthcare industry across the board—nursing homes and hospitals. My hope is that we can get back to work on that. Perhaps after this legislation has passed, as we look at what we do next, let's be sure that we are providing that protection in combination with providing that help to our State and local governments that need it, where they can demonstrate they need it. I don't think it will be in this package, but it should be in the next package.

I will say, this legislation on COVID is needed and we ought to move it now. We cannot go home for the holidays without passing COVID-19 rescue legislation.

Again, to me, it is a rescue package. It is not a stimulus package as much as it is getting us through this period, providing that bridge between now and when the vaccine is readily available.

This legislation is likely to be part of a broader bill that will include a number of things, including spending for the year so we don't have a government shutdown. It is a good thing not to have a government shutdown.

It is also likely that it will include some tax provisions which are so-called tax extenders.

I would say one thing, that I hope it includes is the permanent extension of tax relief for our craft beverage industry. This would be craft breweries, craft vintners, craft distillers. We passed legislation a few years ago that was very important to them, that allowed them to have a reduction in the excise tax they pay on certain volumes—relatively low volumes of their product.

As a result, many of these businesses have been able to expand, hire people, and now they have the possibility of this expiring at the end of the year and having a big bill due that they cannot afford.

We are proud in Ohio to be the home of an industry, the craft beer production industry. It is now No. 6 in the country. It supports 81,000 jobs. It is a business that has been hurt for two reasons: One, if you think about it, the restaurants aren't doing the business they used to do, so if you are providing your product to a restaurant, you are hurt. But also, a lot of these craft distillers or craft brewers or craft vintners have their own tasting rooms or their own brew pubs, and those, in some cases, have been shut down altogether. In other cases, their revenues have crashed, so it would not be the time for them to be facing a big tax bill, and that is what the excise tax would be. Income tax you pay later in the year; excise tax you would have to pay right away.

So my hope is that that will be extended permanently. More than half the Members of this body joined me and Senator WYDEN on a letter to our leadership about this, urging that this extender, which has worked so well to increase jobs and opportunity in America, can continue on a permanent basis going forward.

My hope is that that is part of the package as well. That will help in terms of the economic stimulus part of this, which is also important.

I thank you for what you are doing if you are one of those people out there who is promoting the vaccines and talking about the importance of our getting the vaccines. If you are not, I hope you will look at the research. I hope you will look at the fact that we should be encouraging everyone to get vaccinated unless someone has a health problem that makes it difficult for them.

The polling data is not encouraging on this. The last Gallup poll shows that only 58 percent of Americans are comfortable being vaccinated. That needs to change.

I have heard some people say: Well, when you look at the polling, it shows that Democrats are concerned because this happened in the Trump administration, this vaccine development.

This is not political. Take the politics out of it.

These are scientists. They have been working around the clock over the past

9 months, 10 months, to get us to this point. These are scientists who are now working around the clock to look carefully at these vaccines to determine whether they are approved or not. These are the scientists who are making decisions, not the politicians. It is the people in the white coats. We need to trust them, for the sake of our country, because we need to reverse this terrible virus and the pandemic that is causing all of the issues that we talked about earlier today, to our communities, to our families. So the way to do that is to ensure that we do, in fact, not just have this vaccine available but that people take advantage of it and are willing to be vaccinated.

I hope, if you are listening this evening, that you will pass that word along and that you, again, will do your own research. Look at it. But my hope is that the conclusion will be to get to the period we want to get, which is to have people feel like they can reengage in the economy and feel like they can be back with their loved ones and congregate and feel like they can go back to church or their other place of worship; they feel like they can send their kids back to school; they feel like they can get back to a more normal life. That will happen through the accessibility and the ability to actually get that vaccine.

So my hope is that those listening tonight will do that and do their part in spreading that message instead of spreading the virus.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Alaska.

CORONAVIRUS

Ms. MURKOWSKI. Mr. President, I had an opportunity to listen to my friend and colleague from the State of Ohio outline in great detail the efforts that a bipartisan group has been working on for just a month now.

It was just a month ago, I was reminded—November 17, apparently—that I had an opportunity to invite some colleagues over to my house for dinner and conversation. And while it wasn't pizza, it didn't make any difference what we were eating. It was all about the conversation and what we could do to be responsive to the urgency of the need.

As my friend from Ohio has said, people in Ohio are suffering. People in Alaska are suffering. People around the country are suffering. And they are looking to us for answers and for hope.

I felt on Monday that there was that sense of hope that we could offer. It is not the end-all and be-all in terms of a legislative proposal, but it was a dozen Members, bipartisan—Republicans and Democrats from this body, as well as Republicans and Democrats from the House—coming together over the course of a month, hours on Zoom, digging into the details and the issues in a way that, as someone who has been part of this body now for 18 years, I

have not had the opportunity to be as engaged in every level of the debate and aspect as we were in these conversations.

The Senator from Ohio, while he might not have been at that dinner, was with us every step of the way and was truly leading on the negotiations when it came to the liability provisions and the input in so many other areas.

But what we were able to outline, given a framework of how we can be responsive to the pandemic and the economic crisis at hand, focusing on the most vulnerable—those who have lost their jobs, those who have a small business that is open but just barely open because there are no customers or because the limitations on your restaurant are so small you can barely even afford to keep your doors open—to be responsive to those who have lost their jobs, to those who are looking at the first of January and wondering if they are going to be able to stay in their home or in their apartment, to those families who have children at home who haven't been in a classroom since March of this year, for those rural healthcare providers that have been struggling as they have tried to meet the crush of demand and need within their small hospitals.

What we tried to do was build a package that was responsive to the emergency at hand. And as Senator PORTMAN has noted, this was not designed to be a stimulus bill. This is not designed to be the end-all, be-all for how we move forward. It is targeted emergency relief.

What we were able to present on Monday, which I felt was so hopeful, were not only the debate and the contours of the framework but then to actually put that into legislative text—5 or 6 inches of legislative language, a bill—a bill for this body to consider, a path to move us forward at a time when it is so incredibly critical.

Also on Monday, we were met with hope because the vaccine—the long-promised vaccine—has come about in extraordinarily short order, historic efforts by so many to get the development to this point, to get the approval, the safe approval, and now moving forward to distribution.

The headline in our largest newspaper yesterday was “Morale gets a boost” as vaccine arrives. And, boy, do we need a morale boost.

This is a dark time in Alaska right now. The sun sets about, I don't know, maybe about 3:45 in the afternoon right now, so it makes for a short day. But we are used to short days because we know that in the darkest times of winter, there is going to come that time when things start to change and the days actually begin to get longer; the sunlight is with us more and more.

And as Alaskans are considering the very deep, deep economic strife that we are in right now, we know that there is light at the end because the vaccine is arriving; that is coming.

But in the meantime, they need to get from here to there. So what we

have outlined in this proposal—this bipartisan, bicameral proposal—is just exactly that. It is that lifeline that can get them from December to March, to April, when hope really starts to return.

So I know that there is a great deal that is being considered right now. As I have shared with folks, I say: Well, we were able to advance the ball significantly with this effort that we have made. But when we presented that multihundred-page package to the public, to the administration, to leadership, we basically said: Here is a gift. Take it.

So we have kind of lost ball control, if you will. That is good. That is fine. That is what this process is all about. But I am just urging that we commit with every sense of expediency and urgency to do our business quickly and fairly, with the politics aside, because the last thing that folks back home need, whether it is in Ohio or Alaska, is to know that we might have wrapped up our business here, and we didn't hear them. We didn't respond to their need. We left them hanging. That is not an option for us, and that will not happen.

We are all pledging to make sure that we resolve this before Christmas or we are not going home. But we can do better than that. We don't need to draw this out. We have an opportunity, working together, so I encourage those who are negotiating. We have provided not only a template and a framework, but we have really given you considerable meat in terms of this legislation.

My hope is that we are going to have good news very, very shortly that will allow us to not only address the urgency in response to this COVID pandemic but also be able to resolve our end-of-year appropriations and other matters that we have had working before this body.

But as they say, we are running out of daylight, so let's get moving with it.

TRIBUTE TO BRIAN HUGHES

Ms. MURKOWSKI. Mr. President, speaking of moving, I wanted to take a few minutes on the floor this afternoon to recognize a couple of individuals who are moving on.

We have heard some floor speeches in these past several weeks from colleagues who have been with us, some for decades, like Senator ALEXANDER, Senator ENZI, and some who were with us for not quite as long, Senator JONES. We have had an opportunity to hear from them and to share our thanks, but I think we all know that as Members of Congress, Members here in the Senate, we are as good as our staffs—the staff who help guide us, who help give us the information, who work with us as we not only help to build policy but just kind of probe and develop and encourage us. The work that our teams do for us is considerable, and it is appreciated, and we need to show that thanks and appreciation.