

U.S. Senator Tom Udall (D-N.M.)
FLOOR SPEECH
COVID-19: THIRD LEGISLATIVE RELIEF PACKAGE
March 25, 2020

Madam President. Today, New Mexico and the nation face a pandemic the likes of which we have not seen in over 100 years. And today the Senate must act to pass the largest relief package for the American people in our history.

First, I would like to extend my thoughts and prayers to everyone who is personally affected by this coronavirus pandemic. And thank the health care workers who are working long hours and risking their own health to save lives. They are performing a national service.

The numbers of infected in our nation and those who have succumbed to the illness are staggering. And if we do not follow public health experts—the totals could be truly horrifying.

In New Mexico, we have 100 diagnosed cases. And today, the first death in our state was reported: a senior citizen from Eddy County, in the Southeast part of our state, passed away Sunday.

All New Mexicans are facing new challenges—a threat to our health and a threat to our economy. My top priority is easing this hardship, and making sure that New Mexicans have what they need to stay healthy and to stay economically afloat.

With that in mind – I am rising today to tell New Mexicans: Relief is on its way.

- Relief to American workers, who have been put out of work, and to small businesses that are making impossible that may go under because of the coronavirus pandemic.
- Relief to our hospitals and frontline healthcare workers, who are facing an overwhelmed healthcare system in the coming weeks and months.
- And relief to states, local governments, and Tribes – that are doing their best to take care of their residents and maintain essential services. State and local governments are desperately in need of assistance only the federal government can provide.
- And Tribal governments, to whom we owe trust and treaty obligations to provide healthcare, education, and community assistance, particularly in times of need.

After days of furious negotiations, I'm pleased, and relieved, that Democrats and Republicans were able to reach agreement on what will be the largest federal relief effort in history. The times demand a response of this magnitude.

The “stay at home” orders which we know are necessary to stop the virus threatens the livelihood of millions of working families that live paycheck to paycheck. Millions of small businesses that power our economy but simply can’t survive during the kind of economic downturn we now face.

The federal government has the power to make sure that people can take the public health measures that are necessary while also staying afloat financially.

We here in the Senate need to make absolutely sure that everyone—not just those at the top—but everyone is taken care of and can weather this crisis.

I am strongly supportive of the small business relief in this bill, which includes loans of up to \$10 million that can be forgiven and turned into grants if employees are kept on the payroll.

This relief will go through the Small Business Administration and be available to any business or nonprofit under 500 employees.

With Democrats at the negotiating table, we worked toward that goal. As a result:

- American workers will receive four months more of unemployment insurance, instead of just three.
 - Because so many Americans are now out of work, we need an expanded unemployment insurance plan. This plan extends unemployment to the self-employed for the first time. It increases the maximum benefit by \$600 per week. Many workers will receive their full pay under this expansion.
 - Just to give an idea of the magnitude of this problem in my home state of New Mexico: During the week of March 9th, we had fewer than 800 claims for unemployment. This last week – we had 11,000. And now, we are receiving 7,000 every day.

Also – because Democrats stood firm:

- Our healthcare system will see an infusion of \$55 billion more into the “Marshall Fund” for healthcare. The total public health care investment in this bill is now \$150 billion.
- We will establish a \$150 billion relief fund for state, local, and Tribal governments to help cover costs of fighting this virus.
 - New Mexico is eligible for up to \$1.25 billion from this fund.
- And we will bring accountability and transparency to the relief fund for industry and large corporations. This relief bill puts in transparency and independent oversight. And also makes sure than elected politicians, including the president, are not the beneficiaries of this fund.

We face a national crisis of monumental proportions. And I'm heartened that Republicans and Democrats in this body joined together over the last several days to face this crisis together as a nation.

This is what we do as Americans.

And I have hope that, as we continue to face down this crisis in the coming weeks and months, we will continue to do so in a united fashion.

As vice chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, I've been particularly focused on making sure that Indian Country is not left out, and ensuring that Tribes – who are on the front lines of this public health and economic crisis – have the resources they need and deserve.

Together with my Democratic colleagues, I fought for and secured an \$8 billion set-aside for Tribal governments and their enterprises. This Tribal relief fund will provide the 574 federally-recognized Indian Tribes with flexible resources—resources they need during the COVID-19 response. I am glad we found bipartisan agreement on this.

We also secured over \$2 billion in emergency funding for Tribal needs, and this includes:

- Over \$1 billion for the Indian Health Service that will be used for everything—from expanding medical services, to purchasing equipment, to promoting public health education, to expanding tele-health services and increasing disease surveillance.
- And over \$700 million that will go to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Bureau of Indian Education, and the HUD Office of Native American Programs. These funds will support Tribal governments as they make their way through this crisis and support their members support BIE schools and tribal colleges and universities so that students continue with their education and provide housing for those most in need who are impacted by this terrible virus.

These are key victories. But we're not done. We must uphold our trust and treaty responsibilities to all American Indians and Alaska Natives.

And so Congress must do more to respond to the unique COVID-19-related public health and economic crises in Indian Country. Tribes are some of the most vulnerable populations, with the least robust health care systems. We have a very scary outbreak on the Navajo Nation, and I'm sure that we need to weigh in and help there. For our next response package – and believe me, we're going to monitor this closely and in all likelihood, we are going to be back here again—we must make sure Indian Country has equal access to federal coronavirus resources.

Senator Heinrich and I found hard for New Mexico priorities.

We are working hard on issues that have to do with our national labs, who are some of our top employers. I think, in fact, that they are the biggest.

New Mexico's creative economy can't be left behind. Sitting as lead Democrat on the Appropriations Subcommittee that funds the national endowments, I pushed for an additional \$75 million for both the National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities. These funds will support local artists and arts programs through this tough economic time—when arts and cultural venues are shuttered and artists and others are out of work.

I would like to remind everyone to conscientiously follow the public health measures recommended by the experts. Staying at home is the best thing we can do to stem the course of this virus.

These measures are a “firebreak” that cuts off the fuel for this virus and prevents a catastrophe that overruns our hospitals. Social distance. Wash your hands for 20 seconds. We all have an important part to play in containing COVID-19, and keeping ourselves, our neighbors, and our communities safe.

The State of New Mexico is under a stay-at-home order. I commend Governor Lujan Grisham for taking quick and decisive action she has taken, and she is focusing on this like a laser beam.

I know these measures are difficult and a hardship for many. But we will only be able to revive our economy once this public health crisis is abated. If we just let the virus run its course, we could lose over one million lives in this country—and some of these estimates are two million. That would be totally unacceptable and devastating.

And because of the frontline healthcare workers – the doctors, nurses, technicians – and all those who support that work – janitors, cafeteria workers – this public health crisis will see an end. Thank you to everyone who is risking their own safety to help others, and thanks to all the Senate staff on the floor and the people that work here.

In the days, and weeks, and months ahead – we must continue to closely monitor all aspects of the impact of coronavirus on our nation's health and economy, and continue to decisively and aggressively respond to the needs of the American people. I am confident that, working together as one nation and one people, we will meet and beat this crisis and come out on the other end stronger.

To conclude, we must pass this bill without delay. This is a good compromise, and we must act now.

Madam President, I yield the floor.