

# THE NEW ENGLAND COUNCIL

February 1, 2021

To the New England Congressional delegation:

With the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress and the Biden-Harris Administration now underway, The New England Council shares the hope of many that 2021 will be a year of healing for our nation—healing from the pandemic that has devastated the country, healing from the resulting economic downturn, and perhaps most important, healing from the division that has plagued our society.

We are grateful to our region's Congressional delegation for your tireless work of the past year to advance federal policies aimed at combatting the pandemic, providing relief to businesses and organizations, and stimulating the economy. Of course, we all know there is still much work ahead. The New England Council appreciates the new Administration's commitment to stopping the spread of COVID-19 and supporting our nation's economic recovery. We were further encouraged to see the President put forth his American Rescue Plan even before taking office. The Council believes this plan includes a variety of provisions that will support the goals of stemming the spread of this deadly virus, while also supporting economic recovery. We were particularly pleased that President Biden's proposal includes measures to address racial inequities already present in our society and only exacerbated by the pandemic.

Based upon feedback from a wide array of Council members throughout the region and across various industries, we wanted to highlight for you some of the provisions of President Biden's proposed American Rescue Plan that we believe would be particularly beneficial for our region:

- **National Vaccination Program** – It is critical that the U.S. population receive the vaccine as quickly as possible so that businesses, schools, government, and all facets of American life can safely resume normal operations. Only then will our economy be able to fully recover from the impact of this pandemic. We support President Biden's proposal to invest in a national vaccination program to expedite distribution of the vaccine and to ensure that all people in the U.S. have timely access to vaccination at no cost.
- **Increased Testing** – Until vaccination is widespread, it is critical that all Americans have access to testing to help stop the spread of the virus. We support the President's plan to invest in a major expansion of testing, to provide more rapid-result tests, and to increase lab capacity. Expanded testing will allow businesses to resume operations and schools to reopen in a safe and timely manner.
- **Addressing Health Disparities** – Inequities in access to healthcare and healthcare outcomes have long been a systemic problem in our society. These inequities have only been further compounded by this public health crisis, as we have seen certain groups and communities of color particularly hard hit by the pandemic. We support President Biden's proposal to provide funding for health services for underserved communities, including increased funding for community health centers.

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## The New England Council

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- **Supporting Higher Education** – The pandemic has disrupted higher education in our country, as colleges and universities closed their campuses and transitioned to remote learning early in the pandemic to keep students and staff healthy. More recently, schools have worked diligently to welcome students and personnel back to campus in a safe manner. All of this has placed incredible strain on our institutions. President Biden’s proposed expansion of the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund will help alleviate this strain, however we would urge you to include both public and private institutions as eligible to receive funds. The economic impact of our higher education institutions is vital to maintain in our communities as educators and employers.
- **Combatting Food Insecurity** – We have seen unprecedented levels of food insecurity as a result of this public health crisis, with communities of color again being particularly hard hit. The President’s proposed extension of the 15 percent benefit increase for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) will help ensure that Americans have access to affordable, healthy groceries. We also support creating automatic adjustments to SNAP benefits that are in line with health and economic circumstances.
- **Bolstering Financial Security of Individuals and Families** – This pandemic has placed unbelievable strain on individuals and families as millions of Americans have lost their jobs or seen a decrease in wages. We believe the following provisions in the President’s plan will help bolster the financial security of individuals and families, enabling them to cover basic household and other expenses, and ultimately stimulate the economy:
  - Direct Relief Payments of \$1,400 per person;
  - Extending and expanding unemployment insurance benefits;
  - Extending foreclosure and eviction moratoriums;
  - Rental, energy, and water assistance for hard-hit individuals and families;
  - Tax relief, including making the Child Tax Credit fully refundable and expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit for the year; and
  - Expanded access to affordable, high-quality childcare.
- **Public Transit Assistance** – Safe, affordable, and dependable public transit is vital to our region’s economy and to ensuring economic opportunity for all. The proposed financial relief for the most hard-hit public transit systems will ensure these important services are available, particularly as so many Americans return to work in the weeks and months to come.
- **Support for Small Businesses** – Small businesses are the lifeblood of our economy, employing nearly half of the private sector workforce, and they have been particularly hard hit by the pandemic. We support President Biden’s proposed support for minority-owned small businesses and those in the most impacted industries through grant funding and support for small business financing programs.

Recognizing that recovery will be a long, slow process, we trust that Congress will consider additional relief and economic stimulus proposals in the months ahead. Indeed, President Biden has indicated that the American Rescue Plan is the first of two major proposals his Administration will put forward, with the second more focused on economic stimulus. As you consider next steps in response to the pandemic and resulting economic crisis in the months to come, we encourage you to consider the following recommendations that have been provided by our members:

- **Public Education on Vaccination** – Numerous studies and polls have indicated that there is still a significant portion of the U.S. population who question the safety and/or efficacy of the

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vaccines currently available, and are therefore hesitant to be vaccinated. Research has shown that minority populations are particularly hesitant about vaccination. We encourage you to provide resources to support public education, and in particular, funding for community-based education efforts to educate vulnerable populations about the safety of the vaccines.

- **Healthcare** – Our region’s healthcare providers have truly been on the front lines of this pandemic and we are grateful for their tireless work to treat those afflicted with the virus. We respectfully recommend the following additional assistance to support our healthcare sector:
  - Additional relief for healthcare providers, including direct assistance as well as loan forgiveness;
  - Hospital Emergency Preparedness funding to assist hospitals in continued planning and preparedness for hazmat, evacuation, surge planning, and mass casualty events, as well as ongoing expenses associated with the pandemic response;
  - Telehealth capabilities were crucial to providing ongoing healthcare services amid the pandemic, and we encourage you to make permanent some of the short-term provisions providing more flexibility for telehealth and to expand coverage for such services; and
  - Flexibility to allow providers to practice medicine across state lines was essential to allow hospitals and health systems to move clinicians as needed, and we encourage you to continue to provide such flexibility to ensure patients throughout our region have access to the best care possible.
- **Higher Education** – New England is home to hundreds of higher educational institutions, which have grappled with the unique challenge of continuing provide quality education to our next generation workforce, while also keeping student, faculty, and staff safe and healthy. We urge you to consider the following additional measures to support the region’s higher education sector:
  - While the support for public colleges and universities put forth in the President’s plan will certainly be beneficial to those institutions, private institutions have also been severely impacted by the pandemic. Both public and private institutions have seen additional costs and reduced funding and these pressures could jeopardize the sector’s role as employers in our region. We encourage you to provide additional financial assistance to BOTH public and private colleges and universities.
  - Given that institutions of different types and sizes have been impacted by the pandemic in different ways, we encourage you to provide them with a level of flexibility about how to best use financial support provided to best address their individual needs.
  - We encourage long term support for higher education during this crucial time, including support for traditional means of driving education like Pell Grants. We encourage support for Pell Grants during this time as the primary support for students pursuing post-secondary education.
- **Research Funding** – New England is home to a wide array of research institutions, including both universities and medical centers. Many of these research facilities have played an important role in developing treatments and vaccines for COVID-19, while also continuing to advance research on other critical challenges facing our nation. The pandemic has caused significant disruptions to research supported by federal agencies. We encourage you to

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support supplemental research funding to provide critical support for our scientific community in the next relief package to ensure that this important work can continue.

- **Transportation** – In addition to public transit systems, our region’s airports and the airlines which serve New England have been greatly impacted given the sharp decrease in travel over the past year – a trend that could continue well into 2021. As you look to longer term measures to reinvigorate the economy, we encourage you to include assistance to this important sector.
- **Paid Family and Medical Leave** – This pandemic has highlighted the need for a unified, federal policy on paid family and medical leave. While many states have their own policies in place, employers with operations in multiple states have found it challenging to implement policies that comply with inconsistent state requirements.

The New England Council will continue to work with our members across industries and throughout the region to identify needs and priorities as we all work toward the shared goal of rebuilding our economy and helping our region and our nation recover from this crisis. We will continue to communicate to you the federal policy priorities of the region in the weeks and months ahead, including providing feedback on additional proposals put forth by the new Administration.

If you or your staff have any questions or would like further information on any of these recommendations, please feel free to contact me or a member of our staff. Again, we are very grateful to you for your ongoing leadership during this unprecedented time in our nation’s history.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James T. Brett". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "J".

James T. Brett  
President & CEO

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