

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 3, 2021

The Honorable Janet Yellen
Secretary of the Treasury
U.S. Department of Treasury
1500 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20220

Dear Secretary Yellen,

We write to urge you to ensure that the direct assistance provided by Congress reaches people experiencing homelessness. The bipartisan relief package enacted into law on December 27, 2020, provided a round of direct payments worth up to \$600 per adult, and there are currently efforts underway to provide additional direct payments in future COVID-19-related legislation. The COVID-19 public health emergency has placed an ongoing financial burden on millions of Americans, and we are optimistic that this assistance will help cover necessary expenses resulting from the pandemic. These efforts only succeed, however, if the Treasury Department and Internal Revenue Service (IRS) commit to conducting outreach to all populations to make sure they are aware of their potential eligibility and can sign up for and receive the payment. We recognize President Biden's interest in addressing this and encourage you to take into account the following information as you work on this important issue.

People experiencing homelessness have been disproportionately impacted by the negative health effects of COVID-19 and the unprecedented economic crisis that has followed. Overcrowding in shelters, the lack of basic hygiene and sanitation in outdoor encampments, and barriers to accessing health care and economic opportunities are added challenges that people experiencing homelessness have faced over the past nine months. While it is clear that we all must do more to provide safe, stable housing for these individuals, we also must ensure that these communities are not left behind as the Treasury Department distributes economic relief payments.

Since the passage of the CARES Act, far too many Americans have been unable to access the relief they are entitled to under the law. Despite Section 2201(e) of the CARES Act requiring the Secretary of the Treasury to conduct a public awareness campaign on the availability of these direct payments for people who have not filed tax returns in recent years, the IRS reported that approximately 9 million non-filers had yet to claim their direct payments nearly six months after the CARES Act was enacted into law.¹ It is clear that additional outreach and accommodations for non-filers are necessary.

We urge you to, at a minimum, take the following steps to ensure that people experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity receive the direct assistance payments they are entitled to

¹ "IRS to mail special letter to estimated 9 million non-filers, urging them to claim Economic Impact Payment by Oct. 15 at IRS.gov," Internal Revenue Service, accessed February 2, 2021, <https://www.irs.gov/newsroom/irs-to-mail-special-letter-to-estimated-9-million-non-filers-urging-them-to-claim-economic-impact-payment-by-oct-15-at-irsgov>.

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under the law. First, the Treasury Department should publish specific procedures for how those without a permanent address, government issued identification, or bank account can access their payment. Second, we urge you to expand on your guidance for non-filers and provide additional options for people to claim their payments. Simply offering a website where non-filers can register for their payments is not adequate, as many people experiencing homelessness have limited or no access to the internet. Third, we urge you to work with the Department of Housing and Urban Development to conduct outreach to local Continuums of Care and social service organizations. All across the country, these organizations have come up with innovative ways to spread awareness about eligibility for relief payments. Non-profits have provided internet-accessible phones or computers so people can use the non-filers tool created by the IRS last year, helped individuals collect personal identification information, and even offered to receive checks at the organization on behalf of those without a permanent address.²

We are pleased that President Biden has already made it a priority to complete the distribution of unclaimed stimulus checks through his recent executive order,³ and that the Treasury Department has responded by promising to expand efforts to reach people without internet access and analyze other barriers that currently unserved households may be facing.⁴ However, due to the urgency of the current economic crisis and the assistance that these checks could provide to people experiencing homelessness, we ask that you provide us with regular updates on your efforts. We also ask that the Treasury Department publish a detailed report of all outreach conducted to local Continuums of Care and social service organizations, and an analysis of how many people experiencing homelessness have yet to claim their stimulus payments from the most recent COVID-19 relief bill. We are confident that by taking these steps, the Treasury Department will be well-equipped to distribute the current round of stimulus payments and any future relief that may be provided by Congress.

Thank you for your work on these important issues, which will benefit millions of Americans struggling with housing insecurity during this unprecedented public health and economic crisis.

Sincerely,

Senator Tina Smith
Senator Ron Wyden
Senator Tammy Baldwin
Senator Sheldon Whitehouse
Senator Tammy Duckworth
Senator Sherrod Brown

² “Guidance for Helping People Experiencing Homelessness Access Their Economic Impact Payments,” National Low Income Housing Coalition, accessed February 1, 2021, https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/Guidance_Accessing-EIPs.pdf.

³ Jim Tankersley and Alan Rappoport, “Biden Signs Orders to Expand Food Stamps and Raise Wages, but Says Economy Needs More Help,” *New York Times*, January 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/22/business/biden-food-stamps-stimulus-checks.html>.

⁴ “FACT SHEET: Treasury to Work to Ensure Families Get Access to Economic Impact Payments,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, accessed January 22, 2021, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/featured-stories/fact-sheet-treasury-to-work-to-ensure-families-get-access-to-economic-impact-payments>.

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CC: Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of the Secretary