

The American Rescue Plan Act: Protecting and Supporting Frontline Workers

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Frontline workers are essential to how North Carolina navigates the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and its recovery. Throughout the pandemic, frontline workers faced increased risk of exposure, hospitalization, and death. The American Rescue Plan Act provides funding for, and has provisions that support and protect, frontline workers in various industries.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the many ways that public health emergencies impact not just an individual's health and well-being, but social drivers of health such as the environments in which people live, work, and learn. The American Rescue Plan Act, passed in March 2021, expands services and increases funding for many safety-net programs, such as Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The package also acknowledges the wide range of services frontline workers provide. This is important because at the beginning of the pandemic, many believed that frontline workers were mostly health care professionals, as hospitals were experiencing a surge of patients. However, as the public health emergency continued, the definition and recognition of who is a frontline worker began to expand from clinicians to meat processors to individuals working in grocery stores. As vaccines were made available, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) created a ranking of essential industries by risk of exposure to COVID-19 as a resource to states and local entities as they began developing strategies for vaccination. More broadly, the CDC notes that frontline workers "conduct a range of operations and services in industries that are essential to ensure the continuity of critical functions in the United States" [1]. Frontline workers help deliver our mail, make sure there is food to purchase in the supermarkets, help manufacture goods, take care of loved ones in nursing homes, educate children, work in food service, and transport residents on buses and trains.

When President Biden signed the American Rescue Plan Act into law, it signaled the start of much-needed relief for the country, businesses, communities, and frontline workers. The Rescue Plan has \$1.9 trillion intended not only for vaccinations for COVID-19 and other health services associated with testing and treatment, but also other supports such as

economic stability and nutrition [2]. Many of the Rescue Plan Act's provisions build on existing safety-net programs and are linked to social determinants of health, addressing inequities experienced by many frontline workers who earn low wages. Safety-net programs are countercyclical, meaning that there is increased enrollment and need for these supports during times of economic hardship. So just as most government entities, organizations, and agencies are hoping to reduce spending, there is increased spending for safety-net programs so that households can continue to access resources for day-to-day needs.

Addressing Equity in the Frontline Workforce

In addition to understanding the wide range of services frontline workers provide in support of day-to-day activities, health care needs, and the public health infrastructure, it is essential to acknowledge the inequities many of them face while providing essential services. The Kaiser Family Foundation released a report showing that African Americans, American Indians and Alaska Natives (AIAN), and Latinos have much higher risk of exposure and more confirmed cases and deaths as a result of COVID-19 [3]. A report from the Center for Economic and Policy Research shows that Black frontline workers are more likely to have working class occupations that put them at risk (Figure 1) [4]. Considering frontline workers in the meat and poultry processing industry, 87% of COVID-19 infections were among Black, Latino, and Asian workers [5]. Sixty-three percent of Black frontline health care workers report that the pandemic has had a deleterious impact on their ability to pay for basic needs in addition to experiencing the most COVID-19 infections, deaths, and hospitalizations (Figure 2) [4, 5]. Even as vaccine distribution ramped up across the country, reports show disparities in vaccination amongst racial and ethnic groups that already experience a disproportionate share of COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths [6].

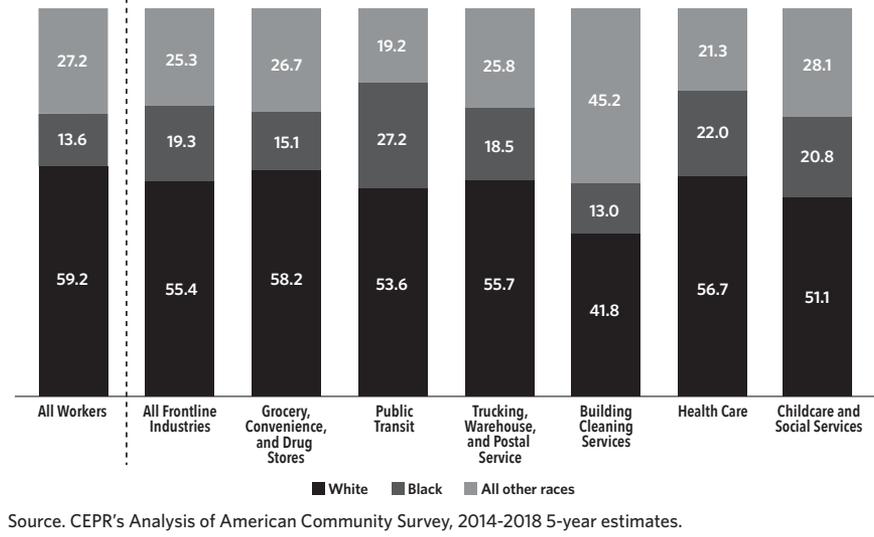
One study in preprint reports that frontline workers of

Electronically published September 20, 2021.

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N C Med J. 2021;82(5):345-349. ©2021 by the North Carolina Institute of Medicine and The Duke Endowment. All rights reserved. 0029-2559/2021/82509

FIGURE 1.
Black Workers are Overrepresented in the Frontline Working Class



racial and ethnic groups that are historically overburdened face many barriers and disparities in health care despite their roles [7]. Furthermore, the study shows that Black, Latino, and AIAN people are overrepresented in jobs that have fewer COVID-19 protections but high risk for exposure to COVID-19 [7]. Data show that it is more likely for a White person with a high-risk job, such as a physician, to have access to personal protective equipment, whereas an overburdened person belonging to one of the aforementioned racial and ethnic groups could also have a high-risk job, such as belonging to the cleaning staff at the same hospital, but lack access to protections [7]. Given the disproportionate burden frontline workers of color face, policy that addresses recovery and protection must address disparities and inequities.

Economic Support

Poverty and experiencing financial hardship are social determinants of health. The pandemic continues to have a significant impact on the economy and business, and frontline workers continue to experience uncertainty regarding income and employment status. The Rescue Plan Act recognizes that poverty, an upstream social determinant of health, impacts nearly 15 million children in the United States [1]. The Pew Research Center reports that Black and Latino children are more likely to experience poverty than Asian and White children [8]. The Rescue Plan Act extends the child tax credit, providing additional economic support to help families of frontline workers recover and continue to access the resources and supports children need for healthy growth and development. The age limit for this credit has been increased from 16 to 17 and the full credit is available to couples making up to \$150,000 or families with a single parent making up to \$112,500 [1]. Those who qualify will receive payments up to \$300 per child per month starting in July

2021 through the end of the calendar year [2]. The available amount for children under six years old is \$3600, and for children aged 6-17 it is \$3000 [9]. The Rescue Plan Act also increases the availability of the earned income tax credit for workers without children to include workers aged 19-24. Furthermore, the earned income tax credit is increased from \$540 to \$1500, which will be helpful to frontline workers earning low wages [9].

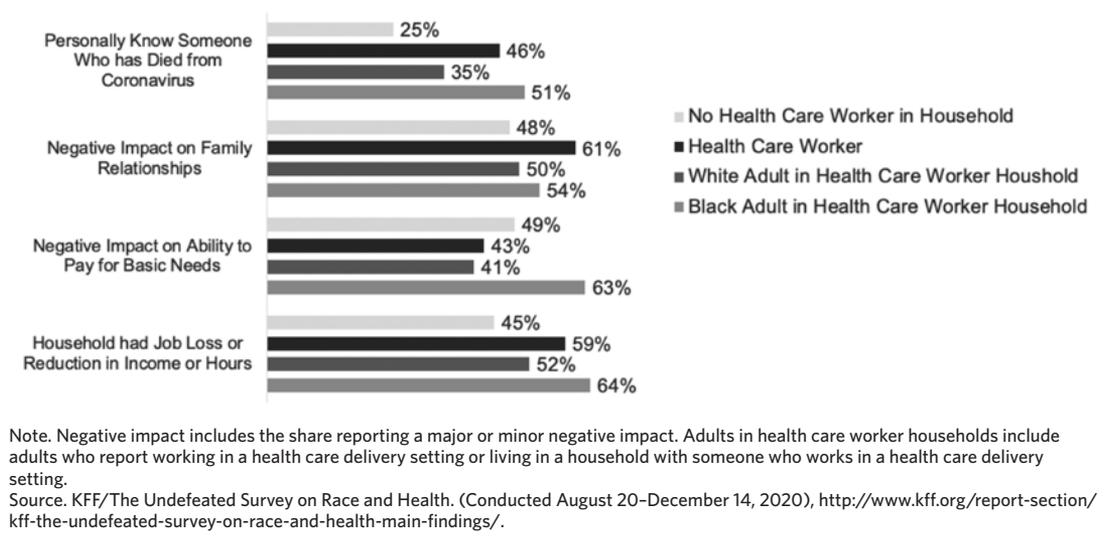
The Rescue Plan Act has many economic provisions to help support various industries to which frontline workers belong, including payroll protections for workers in industries ranging from child care to food service. Unemployment benefits associated with the pandemic were also extended in the Rescue Plan Act. Furthermore, workers who make less than \$150,000 will not be subject to federal taxes on the first \$10,200 received in unemployment benefits. The Rescue Plan Act also provides tax credits to employers that provide emergency paid sick or family leave. These credits expire at the end of September 2021 [2, 10].

One of the most widely discussed and anticipated economic supports in the American Rescue Plan Act was the stimulus check. Individuals making less than \$75,000 and married couples with annual incomes less than \$150,000 received \$1400 and \$2800, respectively, in relief payments [2]. These provisions are especially important in addressing inequities, considering that African American, AIAN, and Latino populations, who make up over 40% of frontline workers [11], face significant economic insecurity in addition to facing disparities in COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths.

Nutrition and Agriculture Support

The Rescue Plan Act includes a 15% increase in the SNAP maximum benefit and allows for a cash voucher increase of \$35 for up to four months if recipients are enrolled in

FIGURE 2.
COVID-19 Impacts by Health Care Worker Status and Race



the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) [2]. These benefits are crucial, as Figure 2 shows how frontline workers have experienced economic hardship. Additionally, the plan provides \$1.135 billion in funding to states through 2023 to better equip SNAP to meet administrative needs associated with the demand for the safety-net program [2].

Another category of frontline workers is the population that works in agriculture. The Rescue Plan Act offers support through farm loans and additional funding through the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). Regarding equity, the Rescue Plan Act specifically notes that financial supports should target socially disadvantaged individuals. The plan defines this group as “a farmer, rancher, or owner or operator of nonindustrial private forest land who is a member of a socially disadvantaged group” [2].

Child Care Workforce Support

Child care providers are frontline workers on whom other frontline workers, from physicians and nurses to construction workers and transit workers, rely. However, the COVID-19 public health emergency exposed the economic fragility of the child care industry. Many local child care providers reported financial strain as they needed to provide personal protective equipment (PPE), increase cleaning, and implement other supports for staff all while experiencing a decrease in demand as some families discontinued use of their services [12]. In addition to \$25 billion in emergency funding, the Rescue Plan includes nearly \$15 billion for the Child Care and Development Block Grant that child care providers can access to help them meet payroll obligations and purchase protections needed to keep staff and children safe and healthy throughout the pandemic [13, 14]. Funding for child care addresses equity in that many frontline workers are women and many belong to racial and ethnic groups

that are overburdened and have access to fewer resources and supports [15]. Ensuring the ability to earn paychecks and access COVID-19 protections in order to reduce the risk of becoming ill or spreading COVID-19 to others is a high priority.

Health Care and Coverage Support

The Rescue Plan Act contains numerous provisions that address health and access to health services. Like many of the aforementioned provisions, the package addresses the needs of populations that have been hit especially hard by the pandemic and were underserved and overburdened even before the public health emergency. Rural health care facilities also received financial support, as they may have experienced financial hardship meeting high demand for telehealth services and may need more support with vaccine distribution [16].

The Rescue Plan Act also has important provisions that protect frontline workers. In regard to health coverage, the plan provides tax credits to employers that provide emergency paid sick or family leave. Many frontline workers experienced uncertainty regarding their employment status, whether they faced termination or reduction in hours, affecting their access to care since most people have health insurance through their employer. The Rescue Plan Act allows for special enrollment for some circumstances and free COBRA coverage for employees for six months [17]. Regarding health and COVID-19 risks, the Rescue Plan Act includes \$100 million for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for worker protections such as PPE, including protections for many frontline workers, among them those working in meat processing and correctional facilities.

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) has also been enhanced to meet the growing demand for health insurance coverage.

As employment continues to fluctuate for many, people are increasingly going to the ACA Health Insurance Marketplace for coverage. The Rescue Plan Act increases individual and household eligibility for financial assistance to those over 400% of the federal poverty level [2]. For Marketplace enrollees who have already received subsidies, there is increased financial assistance to help cover premium costs [16, 18].

The Rescue Plan Act gave the states that have not expanded Medicaid a significant incentive to do so and fully implement the ACA. Data show that Medicaid expansion would have significant impact on workers who earn low wages, such as child care providers, store clerks, and farmers [19]. The Rescue Plan Act incentivizes nonexpansion states in that not only will the federal government pay 90% of Medicaid cost for the expansion population, but it will increase Federal Medical Assistance Percentages (FMAP) for the regular Medicaid program by 5% for two years [1]. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act increased the FMAP starting in January 2020 and throughout the duration of the pandemic by 6.2 percentage points, thus increasing the FMAP to \$73.85 [16]. If North Carolina expands Medicaid, the FMAP could approach 80, which means for every dollar North Carolina spends on Medicaid, the federal government pays 80 cents.

Conclusion

The American Rescue Plan Act is a \$1.9 trillion package that not only addresses the immediate health care needs associated with COVID-19 but also gets to more upstream social determinants of health. Given the range of occupations, income, and disparities in health outcomes associated with the pandemic, provisions in the Rescue Plan Act that address inequities will help many frontline workers continue their work and recover. It is important to note that the American Rescue Plan Act expands upon many existing safety-net programs and that additional funding for these programs is temporary and will expire in 2021. Future research should consider whether these increases in safety-net program supports should be ongoing, considering the inequities many frontline workers and their families experienced before the pandemic and will continue to encounter as the country rebuilds and recovers. **NCMJ**

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Acknowledgments

Disclosure of interests. No disclosures were reported.

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