

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 21, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
H-232, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
H-204, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
S-230, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
S-220, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader McCarthy, Leader McConnell, and Leader Schumer:

Thank you for all of your efforts over the last few weeks to pass essential legislation to combat the COVID-19 crisis, both to keep Americans healthy and to address the economic fallout of schools and businesses closing across the country. As you come together on future legislation, we respectfully request that you keep Americans with disabilities in mind.

As Co-Chairs of the Congressional Autism Caucus, we have heard from constituents and families of individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and other developmental disabilities who are scared and struggling. While all Americans are facing unprecedented challenges, individuals with disabilities and their families often face additional burdens and needs. These individuals and families may face a severe ‘services cliff’ without any warning or preparation as daily services they rely on have suddenly become unavailable. As such, we are requesting that steps be taken to protect individuals with disabilities and their families going forward. Specifically, we recommend increasing funding for Home and Community-based Services (HCBS), grants to support transitioning Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) services into homes, and expanding telehealth.

Increased funding for Home and Community-based Services (HCBS) is needed to help support people with autism in their homes and communities. HCBS dollars will ensure staff are available to help support people with autism who are quarantined or practicing social distancing and will help communities respond to and prevent the further spread of COVID. Specifically, we urge inclusion of an additional 15% increased FMAP for HCBS serving people with autism and other developmental disabilities. States need these additional, new dollars to minimize waiting lists for HCBS and to provide wage increases as well as overtime pay and paid sick, medical and family leave to home health workers. This increase should allow states broad flexibility to use HCBS in a variety of ways but should focus on include increasing services available, increasing provider payment rates and supporting emergency enrollment.

Additionally, millions of students with autism have suddenly lost access to the special education services and related supports that they relied upon as part of their daily education. The disruption in special education services is catastrophic for families dealing with the current crisis. Additional supports must be provided to ensure students and families have the resources they need to prevent educational regression and maintain health and safety. Furthermore, any legislation to support access to virtual education and other supports must be inclusive of the unique needs of students with disabilities, including requirements under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Specifically, we urge inclusion of grants under IDEA part B and C to states to provide compensatory services and in-home instruction and support services to students eligible for IDEA who need services that cannot be met via traditional remote or distant teaching.

Finally, we also encourage continuing the success of expanding telehealth services available during this current crisis. HRSA grants have led to the development of the ECHO Autism telehealth model which has enabled clinicians to reach people with autism who do not have access to specialists in their home communities. Parents and caregivers also benefit from telehealth models that include caregiver consultation and mentoring. During this time of crisis those services would help enable individuals and their families to address mental health and behavioral healthcare needs while also continuing to implement treatment protocols. Therefore, we would like to encourage additional funding for existing HRSA networks (AIR-P and LEND) to help them develop or expand telehealth models like the ECHO Autism model that target people with autism and other developmental disabilities, families and caregivers, to provide training on skills and treatment protocols.

We thank you for your consideration of these requests, and ask that you reach out to our offices if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Mike Doyle
Member of Congress



Christopher H. Smith
Member of Congress