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Pensions, food stamps, infrastructure: What Congress might include in its next coronavirus relief package

By Ramsey Touchberry On 3/26/20 at 6:24 PM EDT

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Congress is still working to pass an historic [\\$2 trillion economic stimulus](#), the third and most recent emergency relief package since the rise of the coronavirus pandemic. But lawmakers already have their sights set on "Phase 4" legislation.

"There's so many things we didn't get in any of these bills yet in the way that we need to," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) said Thursday.

But with lawmakers not planning to return to the nation's capital until after Easter, it's likely another measure won't be seriously considered until after social distancing regulations are relaxed and large portions of the economy begin to reopen.

Though no concrete plans yet exist, members in both parties say they're eyeing a variety of different proposals to act as a crutch for when the nation's economy begins to emerge from its long slumber.

"A lot of it is gonna depend on how successful we are at defeating the disease and how quickly America can get back to work," Sen. John Barrasso (R-Wyo.), a member of leadership, told *Newsweek*.

Phase 1 allocated more than \$8 billion for local and state medical facilities, as well as funds for research on coronavirus treatment and vaccines; [Phase 2](#) expanded paid sick and family leave, increased food stamps, mandated free coronavirus testing and upped Medicaid; and [Phase 3](#), which passed the Senate Wednesday night and is slated to pass the House Friday, is worth \$2 trillion and will give individual checks to Americans, significantly expand unemployment insurance, provide loans to small businesses and bailout major industries.

From student debt and medical funding to pension plans and small businesses, here's what some lawmakers have set their sights on for Phase 4.

Phase 4 coronavirus stimulus

The US Capitol Building on March 25 in Washington, DC. The US Senate unanimously passed a massive relief package on Wednesday for Americans and businesses ravaged by the coronavirus pandemic as New York hospitals braced for a wave of virus patients. Photo by ALEX EDELMAN/AFP/Getty

Pelosi: clarification for who qualifies for family and medical leave, address pensions, workplace health and safety standards, increase food stamps, more medical coverage for treating and recovering from coronavirus, additional funding for state and local governments and more money for D.C.

A senior Democratic aide told *Newsweek* they proposed the Butch Lewis Act, multi-employer pension reform that would seek to address cuts to pensions with low-interest loans. Pelosi said Thursday the provision was stripped by Republicans from the text of the most recent stimulus, but that she received assurances that President Donald Trump was supportive of the idea.

"We are not so committed to an approach that we can't negotiate a solution," the aide said.

Pelosi also accused Republicans of refusing to include Democratic calls for a 15 percent increase in food stamps, something she said Congress should revisit in Phase 4.

In the third stimulus package, Washington, D.C., was severely shortchanged because it was treated as a territory rather than a state. As a result, the district will receive just \$500 million in federal funds rather than the \$1.25 billion that states get.

"In this bill, they decided to treat the District of Columbia in a very discriminatory way," Pelosi said.

Barrasso: infrastructure and less foreign dependence for critical supplies, such as medicine.

A [bipartisan infrastructure bill](#) Barrasso is pushing would set aside \$287 billion for roads and bridges over the next half-decade.

Senator Marsha Blackburn (R-Tennessee): more prescription drug manufacturing.

Blackburn is the sponsor of a [bipartisan bill](#) that would increase

the U.S. production of active pharmaceutical ingredients that would decrease dependence on foreign countries, particularly China, for vital drugs and prevent antibiotic shortages.

"We've got to start to say how do you make certain this never happens again?" she told *Newsweek*.

Rep. Madeleine Dean (D-Penn.): more individual checks and student debt relief.

Dean told *Newsweek* she'd like to see additional tax rebate checks issued to Americans on a quarterly basis for the duration of the coronavirus pandemic.

"We know that this is not a once and done, but \$1,200 per person is better than nothing," she said. "We'll just have to go back and be more aggressive to get cash in people's hands."

Dean, like many other Democrats, would like to see the federal government forgive—rather than simply suspend—\$10,000 of student loan debt for each person and allow interest-free payments until the pandemic subsides.

Senator Marco Rubio (R-Fla.): relief for small businesses.

Rubio played a major role in the third package's provisions on small businesses, which provided \$350 billion in loans and loan guarantees, portions of which will be forgiven.

"I think it's possible that we may have to come back and invest more," he told *Newsweek*. "I think we will most certainly begin to deal with some of the supply chain disruptions that we've seen."

Don't expect Phase 4 anytime soon

Phase 4 coronavirus stimulus

A family walks past politicians' cars as negotiations on a COVID-19 economic bailout continue on Capitol Hill March 24 in Washington, DC. Photo by BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP/Getty

The next large piece of legislation will focus on further helping hamstrung businesses, jobless workers and resource-strapped hospitals to regain their footing. And the details of such a bill would be determined by several factors, including the status of the American economy.

"Already, we're hearing from some governors about the need for additional resources, and we will evaluate those very carefully," Vice President Mike Pence said at the White House. "The secretary of the Treasury has already indicated and congressional leadership has already indicated a willingness to remain open to [Phase 4]."

On Capitol Hill, Democrats have indicated they'd prefer more swift action than their GOP counterparts.

"When we emerge from this, we will likely become a nation a little more focused on saving than spending, and that's where thoughtful government policy can play a role in overcoming that disposition," Rep. Dean Phillips (D-Minn.) told *Newsweek*. "We've got to inspire spending, and that will be the task of Washington."

Meanwhile, Republicans believe the \$2 trillion stimulus needs time to play out its intended purpose.

"I wouldn't be so quick to say you have to write something else," House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) told reporters. "Let's let this bill work."

Congress won't be in town until after Easter in late April, making it difficult for members to begin substantive talks until they return to Washington.