

Hughes: It's 'a crime to have \$1.3B sitting around'; Ahead of budget debate, Senate Dems release plan for unspent CARES cash

By **Kenny Cooper** - October 16, 2020



Pa. Senate Democrats hold a news conference on spending \$1.3B in CARES Act assistance (Screen Capture)

With round two of this year's budget debate looming, Senate Democrats have rolled out their plan to spend \$1.3 billion in unspent federal COVID-19 relief funds which would include stimulus to hospitals, small businesses, higher education, public safety workers, utilities, child care, food security, and hazard pay.

"We've been trying for many, many months now to drive out more resources," Senate Minority Leader Jay Costa said, D-Allegheny, said during an online news briefing on Friday. "Not only us, but the governor and our colleagues in the House Democratic Caucus have been advocating to spend these resources in a variety of spaces, quite frankly, where folks really need the help and continue to need help."

Pennsylvania received \$3.6 billion in assistance earlier this year as part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security, or CARES Act. Lawmakers showered much of that money across state government, but half remains unspent.

With their bottom lines punctured by the pandemic, states have been looking for Washington to pass additional assistance. But relief talks on any new package are currently at a standstill.

On Friday, Sen. Vincent Hughes, D-Philadelphia, blamed President Donald Trump and Congressional Republicans for the halt of additional financial relief from the federal government.

"But it is a crime, quite frankly, to have \$1.3 billion sitting around programmed to help people but not getting to the people that need it the most," Hughes, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee, said.

The plan for allocating the remaining \$1.3 billion of CARES funding is as follows:

- Business assistance, \$575 million
- Child care, \$75 million
- Food security, \$15 million
- General fund reimbursement, \$150 million
- Hazard pay, \$100 million
- Higher education, \$141 million
- Hospital assistance, \$125 million
- Public safety, \$25 million
- Utility assistance, \$125 million

"I think it is important that we have a real plan and a roadmap, so that this money doesn't get wasted," Sen. Sharif Street, D-Philadelphia, said. "And then it goes to address the very significant needs that still exist across the Commonwealth."

When it comes to that \$575 million planned for business assistance, Senate Democrats are focusing on small businesses such as bars, taverns, barber shops, salons, and other businesses in the personal care industry, according to Hughes.

"Many of those folks as you know, had to shut down completely," Hughes said. "They couldn't do partial business. They couldn't do curbside activity. They couldn't do anything. They had to shut down completely."

The caucus also wants to allocate \$75 million to childcare providers.

"It goes without saying that unless parents can feel that their children are being cared for, they can't go back to work and be successful at their jobs," Sen. Judy Schwank, D-Berks, said.

Senate Democrats also want to provide an additional \$15 million in funding for food security.

Hazard pay for individuals performing risky job duties is also getting some attention in their plan. Hughes said his caucus views this as a pressing matter as COVID infections rise, according to Hughes.

Additionally, public safety employees, such as volunteer firefighters and EMS workers, throughout the state would also receive \$15 million and \$10 million respectively, Sen. Lindsey Williams, D-Allegheny, said.

"I have heard and I know all of my colleagues have heard from firefighters across their district, EMTs in their district, who are struggling to stay afloat, who have lost the ability to do fundraising, who are really just trying to keep the lights on and take care of us," Williams said.

Pennsylvania institutions would also see some fiscal relief. In the proposal, vulnerable hospitals would receive \$125 million. Higher education institutions would receive \$141 million.

Finally, the plan calls for utility assistance to the tune of \$125 million.

"Utilities don't stop. Electricity doesn't stop. Your water bill doesn't stop. Your heating bill doesn't stop. None of those come to an end in this crisis. And in some circumstances, because folks are home so much, those bills have gone up," Hughes said. "We need to provide assistance for folks to give them some relief in that space."

Democrats must get this proposal passed by November 30, the deadline to pass the second half of the state budget, if they want to see their plans come to fruition.

"If we missed the deadline, the money reverts essentially back to the general fund and then gets redistributed to about 60 counties across Pennsylvania that did not previously receive direct federal CARES payments," Hughes said.

According to Hughes, counties that would be left out of the relief if the deadline is missed include Philadelphia, Allegheny, Montgomery, Chester, Delaware and Berks.

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