

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Senate Floor Speech ahead of the vote on the American Rescue Plan

March 5, 2021

CANTWELL: Mr. President, I come to the floor to talk about the American Rescue Plan, but following my colleague from Washington, and in the presence of the senator from Vermont, I just want to thank them for how hard they have fought for an increase in the minimum wage. Our state, the State of Washington, has led the nation for many years in the highest minimum wage, and it didn't impact our economy. In fact, it helped our economy.

There are now reports, as we have moved towards \$15 for just a little town, SeaTac, to the City of Seattle, to now a plan for our entire state to move to \$15 over a gradual period of time. I urge my colleagues to come together with a plan that can get us to a \$15 minimum wage. I know that we have it in us, I know that we can do it. And I so appreciate our colleagues waging this effort to continue to make this a priority for our nation. I can't tell you enough how much the wages, particularly in a place like Seattle, are going to matter to people to have a livable wage. I know people here have discussed various aspects of this program, and the plans that are in this bill, but I just want them to know that the cost of living in a very expensive place like Seattle demands that we pay workers what they deserve. It also means that we deal with big city problems like homelessness, and deal with making investments, and I hope that our next infrastructure bill will get to that. So this is not the last time I'm going to speak about minimum wage, but I want our colleagues to know that this battle is not over yet, and that if we want to raise the standard of living in the United States, we have to pay a livable wage.

So Mr. President, I come to talk about the details of the rescue plan. This is one year since a young man from Everett, Washington, became the first COVID victim in the United States of America. Not only did he get sick, but many loved ones got sick, their families, and they're all waiting now for vaccines. So this legislation, priority number one for so many Americans right now, is the COVID-19 vaccine. In my state, the State of Washington, more than one million residents have been vaccinated and six million more are still waiting, and everyone knows that demand far exceeds the supply.

Our health care workers are working tirelessly, along with other government officials, to get shots in the arms of individuals. That's why this bill is so important. Because it provides \$20 billion to invest in vaccine administration and distribution. That includes launching community vaccine centers, deploying mobile vaccine units to hard to reach areas, and continuing to support an increased pace of vaccinations. That is job one right now: get the vaccine into the arms of Americans.

So that is why this legislation is so important to continue that effort, but it also provides other support. Extending unemployment benefits for millions of Americans who lost their job as to no fault of their own a year ago, and now, are seeing unemployment benefits expire next week. We know what today's numbers say we still have a very high unemployment rate in the United States

of America. So this bill extends the benefits another five months, until August 29. Very prudent measure to continue to put the resources into the American economy.

It also provides \$1,400 stimulus payment to millions. And it supports new efforts for our restaurants, small businesses, and those devastated by the pandemic so they can help use this money for payroll, rent, utilities, and paid sick leave. This is so important to continue to learn from the programs that COVID has started, to refine them to make it successful for our economy. This also helps children who are at home, helping provide more money for E-Rate and broadband connectivity for schools and libraries. This is so important to individuals. It also provides critical dollars for federal health funding to treat Native Americans in urban areas, a community that has been very hard hit by the pandemic.

Our economy lost 9.8 million jobs in 2020. And our current unemployment rate, as I just said, we know from this data that came out this morning, is still too high. We know that as a result, 19 million Americans, including 460,000 Washingtonians rely on those unemployment benefits. And if we don't act by March 14th, 11.5 million people will lose their extended unemployment benefits. So that's why this program is so important to get passed today in the United States Senate.

So the restaurants, as we know, have been very plagued by this problem, and the PPP program has been helpful, but I believe this legislation will be even more helpful. Since the beginning of the pandemic, 110,000 restaurants across our country have closed, either permanently or for an extended period of time, including 2,300 in the state of Washington. And some are just struggling to hang on. For example, The Black Cypress restaurant in Pullman, Washington, lost more than \$1 million in revenue and had to lay off workers after the initial PPP loan program ran out. In Southwest Washington, a restaurant like Mighty Bowl in Vancouver, or The Depot Restaurant in Seaview, are operating at 50% revenue loss.

I talked to one of our restaurant owners, Wassef Haroun, who operates very popular restaurants in Seattle, including Mamnoon, he said his restaurants have lost 70% of their revenue compared to 2019. And these are people who are hustling to do standup-popup windows and all sorts of things to keep the restaurants and restaurant employees working. So the Paycheck Protection Program was critical, and these improvements were desperately needed.

So that is why this bill includes new \$25 billion dollar grant programs for restaurants to address those concerns of rent and utilities and sick leave and other things head on. The bill also helps with more funding for the SBA and live venues grant program that we have authorized, and helping those venues stay open. For us in Seattle, music is a thing, and we want these venues to be there. They're part of our history, they're part of our culture, and they're part of a music story that really is about, well, just a little bit of different take on music than maybe some other parts of the world. So we're very proud of it and we don't want to lose these facilities, the home for growing more music and cultural impacts to our society.

So one of the hardest hit businesses have been businesses with ten or fewer employees, in underserved areas like Grays Harbor, Yakima, Ferry, or Pend Oreille counties. This legislation allows \$10,000 grants from the SBA program of Economic Injury and Disaster Loan program to

help with these smaller communities and the small businesses who have been underserved to date on programs that we have passed.

But for the first time in this legislation, there will be support for the aviation supply chain. We're hearing all sorts of discussions about supply chain shortages and the competitiveness of the United States if the United States sees critical supply chain elements not be able to be filled, whether you're talking about the automotive industry or whether you're talking about aviation. Well in the previous bills, certainly I can say this, the Fed made capital available that certainly manufacturers, large-scale manufacturers took advantage of. Previous bills made money available for the airlines to continue operating, as this legislation does as well.

And I would say I think we're probably somewhere between 40% to 45% of the original capacity for airlines that we were previous to the pandemic, which means we're making progress. And that's what we always wanted to see, the ability to return our economy quickly. But in Washington State alone, we have 30,000 aerospace manufacturers and supply chain jobs that have been lost. Our aerospace supply chain is part of a juggernaut for our economy. It helps us with our Gross Domestic Product, and it helps us in containing and keeping a workforce that is skilled, that can work post-pandemic. So in this legislation, we will be, for the first time, making resources available for that supply chain. I want to thank Senators Moran and Senator Warner and a slew of other members who worked on providing resources to this supply chain. It will help us retain and rehire workers in the aviation manufacturing sector. It will help us keep highly skilled workers who serve as the backbone of industries so that our nation can continue to be poised for the recovery. And it helps us in making sure that we are poised for a strong recovery.

We know that aviation manufacturing jobs mean a lot to our nation. Finally, we're going to help stave off the tide of the huge losses that we've seen in that sector. We're going to help the mom and pop machine shops. We're going to take those who have been working on small aircraft parts and landing gears, and doors, and flight controls, all help them with the impact that they felt in trying to keep a workforce during this period of time.

So, Mr. President, these are all important priorities for us as a nation. The vaccines, the unemployment benefits, the stimulus checks, the E-Rate program for helping students learn at home, the investment in the aerospace supply chain. It is important that we get the dollars out the door. This will help us recover. This will help American families wage through the last months of this COVID pandemic fight. But believe me, they need the help in the last months. This fight is not over, and this will help sustain us. I urge my colleagues to pass this legislation.