

**COMMENT OF SENATE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
VICE CHAIRMAN PATRICK LEAHY (D-VT.)
ON THE RELEASE OF THE FY 2021 OMNIBUS APPROPRIATION BILLS
DECEMBER 21, 2020**

I am pleased we have reached agreement on an Omnibus Appropriations bill for fiscal year 2021. This bill provides vital investments for the American people that would be lost under a long-term continuing resolution. It includes increased funding for education and early childhood programs. It provides more money for substance abuse and mental health services, services that are of the utmost importance in these difficult times. It provides increases over last year for food assistance programs both at home and abroad, assistance that is desperately needed as many families struggle to survive during this pandemic. And it includes increases for housing and homelessness services to help those who are the most vulnerable. These are all programs that Democrats fought hard to include.

This agreement is the product of weeks of hard work and compromise. This is not the bill I would have written on my own. It includes things I support and things I oppose. But, on balance, passage of this bill is unquestionably in the interest of the American people, and both the House and the Senate should act on it quickly.

I am deeply disappointed that the Congress is so unforgivably late in completing our work. The fiscal year began on October 1, nearly three months ago. The American people deserve better than this. There is absolutely no reason why this bill could not have been finished months ago. It is unacceptable that the Senate Appropriations Committee failed to mark up a single Appropriations bill this year, and the Senate never considered a single appropriations bill on the floor. We must do better in the 117th Congress. Members of this body want and deserve a voice in what goes into these bills on behalf of their constituents, and we must give them that opportunity.

I thank Chairman Shelby, Chairwoman Lowey, and Ranking Member Granger for their cooperation and partnership as we worked through our differences on this important legislation, and I urge its swift consideration.

Also released today is a much-delayed COVID relief package, and it too is a product of bipartisan compromise. The American people have been waiting for assistance for far, far too long as the Republican leadership took a “wait and see” approach. For 270 days, Leader McConnell and Senate Republicans have blocked every reasonable attempt to provide desperately needed relief, and millions of American families have suffered needlessly.

I support this package. It provides much-needed investments in our economy with support for small businesses. It provides relief for unemployed workers by extending unemployment benefits into March. It makes investments in vaccine production and distribution. It supports health providers, educators, farmers and transportation providers. It includes another round of direct payments to millions of Americans still struggling to pay their mortgage or rent, feed their families, heat their homes, and meet their monthly obligations. It is far from perfect, but we must pass this bill without further delay.

But let me be clear – this bill is only a first step. We must do more. Vermonters, and the American people, need more. The direct payments included in this package are but a fraction of what we should have provided given the dire financial situation of millions of people across this nation, and I will continue to fight for more. State and local governments have laid off over 1.3 million teachers, first responders and other employees since March. They need our help.

Tragically, rates of spousal abuse and child abuse have increased during the crisis and we should be providing funds for Violence Against Women Act and child abuse prevention grants. Vermonters are facing the coldest, darkest months of winter and are struggling to heat their homes, and families need help paying their utility bills through the LIHEAP program.

We are making progress in delivering a vaccine to the American people, but this pandemic is far from over. I will be the first at the negotiating table to work with President Biden in the 117th Congress to address the many needs that are unmet in this bill.

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