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This is a composite photo of the chairmen of six U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' committees who wrote to all members of Congress Feb. 3, 2021, urging passage of an additional COVID-19 relief package. Pictured from top-left are Archbishop Paul S. Coakley of Oklahoma City, Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development; Bishop Shelton J. Fabre of Houma-Thibodaux, La., Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism; Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of Kansas City, Kan., Committee on Pro-Life Activities; Auxiliary Bishop Mario E. Dorsonville of Washington, Committee on Migration; Bishop Michael C. Barber of Oakland, Calif., Committee on Catholic Education; and Bishop David J. Malloy of Rockford, Ill., Committee on International Justice and Peace. (CNS composite/Photos by Nancy Wiechec, Paul Haring, Bob Roller, Tyler Orsburn and Greg Shemitz)

by Catholic News Service

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Six U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' committee chairmen urged each member of Congress to support much-needed pandemic relief legislation that promotes "the dignity and value of all human life" and protects "poor and vulnerable people who are most at risk."

In a Feb. 3 letter to legislators, the chairmen said relief measures are necessary to assist struggling families, businesses, charities, schools and hospitals and other entities.

The bishops also stressed "in the strongest possible terms" that the funds and policies included in any legislation be used to "promote life-affirming policies and not to advance the destruction of innocent unborn human life."

"We similarly express the importance of strengthening and upholding families to our national recovery and of avoiding policies that may erode their integrity or well-being," they said.

"We are hopeful that your response to these present challenges will truly build up the common good. We stand ready to assist you in these efforts, and we ask our Lord to guide you as you weigh decisions that will impact so many," the bishops added.

The letter does not mention specific legislation. Congress is considering two packages: a $1.9 trillion plan from President Joe Biden that has gained Democratic support and a trimmed down $600 billion aid bill proposed by 10 Republican senators.

The bishops addressed 13 areas that deserve attention in any relief bill. They called for support for hunger and nutrition programs, housing assistance, and employment and income support, including additional stimulus payments and expansion of the

Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit.

Emergency aid for Catholic and nonpublic education also is necessary, the bishops said, in response to the loss of learning by students. They specifically requested equitable services for private schools as has been the case since 1965 "without unnecessary bureaucratic thresholds."

The pandemic requires that all people in the country, "regardless of immigration or economic status," have access to testing, vaccination and treatment for the COVID-19 disease, the letter said.

A patient receives the COVID-19 vaccine at a mass vaccination site in Ridgefield, Wash., Jan. 27, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Alisha Jucevic)

In addition, the bishops called for improved access to health care, particularly for poor people and those without employer-sponsored health insurance. Any provisions to boost health care coverage, however, they said, must ensure "that no federal funding go to health plans that cover abortion."

"Any public option for health care, or similar efforts to increase health care, must include protections against using taxpayer dollars for elective abortions," the letter said.

Other policy areas the bishops encouraged legislators to include in a stimulus bill are a pathway to citizenship and work authorization for essential workers and

immigrants; aid to state and local governments; improved safety in prisons, jails and detention centers; consideration of the impact on racial justice; incentivizing charitable giving; and flexibility in funding that supports bilateral and multilateral efforts to address hardships imposed by the pandemic worldwide.

The two measures Congress is weighing include the Biden proposal, called the American Rescue Plan. It would provide bigger stimulus checks, additional aid to the unemployed, hungry and people facing eviction, support for small businesses and state and local governments and more funding for coronavirus vaccines and testing.

Democrats largely agree that such a high spending amount is necessary because of the devastating impact of the pandemic on families and individuals and the overall economy.

Concerned about federal spending even while acknowledging the toll of the pandemic on Americans, Republican senators have said their counterproposal would meet the immediate needs of people struggling to pay rent and utilities and provide a boost to the economy.

Republican lawmakers have declined to support aid to state and local governments that have seen steep declines in tax revenues as millions of people remain unemployed.

The White House and the Republican senators were to continue discussing the plans in an attempt to reach a bipartisan agreement, although Biden has said he believes a massive aid package is necessary to avoid a long-term recession.

Any relief measure that is adopted in the coming weeks would supplement the spending measures in the historic $2.2 trillion CARES Act passed in March and in the $900 billion stimulus bill signed in late December.

Committee chairmen who signed the letter are: Archbishop Paul S. Coakley of Oklahoma City, Domestic Justice and Human Development; Bishop Michael C. Barber of Oakland, California, Catholic Education; Auxiliary Bishop Mario E. Dorsonville of Washington, Migration; Bishop David J. Malloy of Rockford, Illinois, International Justice and Peace; Bishop Shelton J. Fabre of Houma-Thibodaux, Louisiana, Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism; and Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of Kansas City, Kansas, Pro-Life Activities.

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