



May 13, 2021

The Honorable Roy A. Cooper, III
Governor of the State of North Carolina
20301 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699-0301

Dear Governor Cooper:

I am writing you as the Vice Chair of the North Carolina Equal Justice Alliance to urge you to put forward a bold vision for how the American Rescue Plan can address systemic inequities and injustices in our state and put us all on more solid footing for the future. The North Carolina Equal Justice Alliance (EJA) is a community of civil legal aid providers serving low-income and underrepresented constituencies. Equal Justice Alliance's mission is to provide central coordination of a sustained, comprehensive, integrated, statewide system to provide the most effective legal services to people in poverty in North Carolina. Our members include Charlotte Center for Legal Advocacy, Council for Children's Rights, Disability Rights North Carolina, Financial Protection Law Center, Land Loss Prevention Project, Legal Aid of North Carolina, North Carolina Justice Center, North Carolina Prisoner Legal Services, and Pisgah Legal Services. Together we employ approximately 1,000 staff attorneys, paralegals, and support staff, who work together to provide legal help to meet basic needs and promote safety for millions of low-income and vulnerable North Carolinians.

We stand ready to work with you, the NC General Assembly, state agencies and local government leaders to build towards better, more fair outcomes for the North Carolinians who have been hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic. The American Rescue Plan presents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for our state to demonstrate that we value the well-being of all people and the durability of just institutions, and recognize the interconnectedness of our fates.

As lawyers, advocates, and partners to people directly impacted by inequitable and unjust systems, we have seen the barriers that too many families, businesses, and communities face in the pursuit of opportunity and justice. We have especially learned over the past year the importance of connecting with and responding to directly impacted persons, planning for unintended consequences, and investing in sustainable infrastructure.



Regarding the resources provided to North Carolina via the \$5.4 billion combined total aid to state government and program specific funding streams, we offer these recommendations for concrete investments and guiding principles in your proposal to allocate these dollars:

First, with regards to guiding principles, we believe that policy choices must be driven by the complexity of people's lives and the unique challenges posed by living in poverty, incarceration, and/or with disabilities. The pandemic has hit low-wage workers, people of color, and traditionally underserved populations harder, both in health impacts and in economic impact. No one policy can solve the challenges of unaffordable or substandard housing or food insecurity; families and communities need public institutions and systems to overcome entrenched inequities. We believe that policy choices must move beyond immediate response to hardship and, in addition to providing quick relief to the most urgent problems of today, must also build more equitable systems that will strengthen our ability to reduce hardship over time.

Second, with regards to concrete strategies to consolidate our state's recovery, we believe that public investments targeting North Carolina's most vulnerable residents are critical to realizing the full potential of the American Rescue Plan.

Legal aid organizations provide value in outreach and direct services to North Carolina's most underserved populations with the longest road to recovery.

Funding should be provided to community-based organizations, including organizations providing civil legal aid, to provide the information, trusted advice and support to families navigating new programs and processes to access services for which they are eligible. The vaccination campaigns statewide are leveraging the goodwill of community-based organizations to get information about COVID-19 and vaccines to people. Similar strategies – funded equitably and adequately – should be considered for programs that would expand access to direct aid to individuals like the Child Tax Credit and Economic Impact Payments, which stand to have perhaps the greatest and most immediate impact in decreasing poverty of any program in the American Rescue Plan.

Within program-specific funding streams, it is important to ensure that legal representation is available to people and communities as these programs roll out. We believe that public interest lawyers with the trust of community members and the ability to work towards effective and equitable implementation of policy should be considered across programs. Eviction diversion programs have demonstrated the importance of combining rental assistance with legal expertise and representation for residents who must negotiate with landlords regarding rent payments.



More broadly, our Alliance believes that American Rescue Plan investments should be maximized to the benefit of North Carolinians with low income. With this flexible aid to state government, we have the resources to create significant progress towards a new normal of enhanced equity in multiple areas. We urge you to utilize this federal support to invest in broadband and clean water infrastructure projects in rural parts of our state and to subsidize high-speed internet for low-wealth communities; to invest in people's mental health by expanding access to community-based services and supports, including supported housing and peer support specialists; to enhance substance abuse prevention and treatment; to improve maternal health by expanding Medicaid for Pregnant Women to twelve months' postpartum; to provide jobless workers left out of Unemployment Insurance with assistance and working families earning low wages with a refundable tax credit; to improve access to childcare by increasing subsidies to families so they can get back to work and childcare centers can increase pay to educators; to foster the acquisition and stabilization of assets, including farm-based assets, within low-wealth and historically underserved families; to fund re-entry services that support people leaving prison with their job search, housing and transportation needs; to subsidize the creation and preservation of affordable housing units through grants and low-interest loan options supporting shovel-ready developments as well as projects in earlier development and financing phases; to increase wages for direct care workers who support disabled people in their own homes in our communities; and to help children catch up from lost learning and to address historic inequities by boosting state funding for high-poverty schools in keeping with the *Leandro* ruling.

We are deeply appreciative of your commitment and work towards a just recovery that lifts all North Carolinians. The Equal Justice Alliance members offer any additional information, resources, or support to assist in your determination.

Respectfully,

Virginia Knowlton-Marcus
Vice-Chair, North Carolina Equal Justice Alliance
Chief Executive Officer, Disability Rights North Carolina

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