



May 5, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell,

On behalf of the 1.7 million members of the American Federation of Teachers, many of whom are on the frontlines serving communities and saving lives during the coronavirus pandemic, we urge you to support and protect America's seniors, not punish them.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on families and communities across the country, with recorded U.S. cases passing 1 million and the number of deaths over the last two months eclipsing the number of Americans killed during the Vietnam War. Americans of all ages have been infected, but it is seniors who are the most vulnerable to COVID-19, and the fear and uncertainty they face is palpable. This crisis has shown us that now, more than ever, we need to ensure the health, safety and economic security of all seniors.

Unfortunately, under your leadership, the Senate has repeatedly attacked the social safety net, and your response to the pandemic has been to prioritize corporations and, worse, to put the health and economic stability of seniors in jeopardy. We are writing to you—as leaders of the American Federation of Teachers and public pension fund trustees and as those who have retired after long careers as educators—to demand that you commit to supporting and protecting America's seniors in this crisis—and stop proposing policies that would punish older Americans.

Data made available by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that over half of ICU admissions and 80 percent of deaths from COVID-19 have been among individuals age 65 and over. Anyone over 60 is considered to be at higher risk for the disease. Despite the fact that many older Americans already struggled to access high-quality healthcare and affordable medications before the onset of the pandemic, Senate Republicans have taken steps to gut the Medicare program while also failing to take meaningful action to reduce drug costs. The current crisis makes clear that we need a strong Medicare system and real measures to significantly lower prescription drug prices to protect the health of seniors. Americans already pay the highest drug prices in the world, and seniors bear the brunt of these costs. We need to ensure that companies do not profiteer from the pandemic. Drug companies should be prohibited from raising prices of testing kits, new COVID-19 treatments and other drugs to treat the coronavirus.

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

American Federation
of Teachers, AFL-CIO

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Protecting the health and well-being of seniors also requires that the federal government take concrete steps to ensure the safety of long-term care facilities. Headlines from the last few months have painted a grim picture of the extreme susceptibility of seniors residing in long-term care facilities to coronavirus infection. According to data from the Kaiser Family Foundation, nearly one-third of reported coronavirus deaths came from nursing homes, with a number of states reporting that over half of their coronavirus deaths came from nursing homes.¹

We urgently need to increase resources for workers and residents at long-term care facilities—including testing, treatment and personal protective equipment, and open and transparent data related to the incidence of the virus in nursing homes through the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the CDC and other agencies—to protect their health and safety and prevent the spread of COVID-19 among our most vulnerable population. In the long run, federal healthcare policy and funding allocations should work to make long-term care facilities safe, and provide accountability for patients' outcomes and well-being. Gutting the Affordable Care Act has serious, negative consequences for seniors in long-term care facilities and is incompatible with a commitment to seniors' health and well-being.

In addition to protecting the health of older Americans, we also need to ensure their economic security during this crisis and beyond. Social Security is part of the foundation that has helped put many retirees on the path to a stable retirement. For 40 percent of Americans, it represents the sole source of income in retirement.² It is critical that we fully fund Social Security and expand its benefits—not cut the program as you have proposed. Instead of cuts, we need solutions that improve the economic security of retirees and the health of Social Security. Minimum benefits should be increased to reflect a growing cost of living, and the Windfall Elimination Provision and Government Pension Offset provisions should be reformed so that they do not unfairly penalize retired public servants. Seniors and future retirees need to be able to count on a secure retirement. At this important moment in our nation's history, it is critical that Senate Republicans commit to strengthening our Social Security program, not dismantling it.

Your recent suggestion that states should declare bankruptcy to deal with the economic upheaval caused by the pandemic is cruel and counterproductive. Some say your intent was to gut public services and pensions. That is not simply reckless but also demonstrates a deep misunderstanding of the economic importance of public employee pensions. Pensions are deferred wages that workers have earned, and that most

¹ <https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/state-reporting-of-cases-and-deaths-due-to-covid-19-in-long-term-care-facilities/>

² <https://www.nirsonline.org/2020/01/new-report-40-of-older-americans-rely-solely-on-social-security-for-retirement-income/>

contributed to over the course of their employment. With retirement insecurity in this country growing, we need to protect what employees have already contributed. Predictable monthly pension payments are a crucial source of security for retiree households, and they bolster the revenue base of communities across the country.

Recent studies by the National Institute on Retirement Security found that every dollar of retiree pension spending supports \$2.13 in economic output,³ with this multiplier effect even more pronounced in rural areas.⁴ Whether it is Social Security or pensions, middle class retirement security translates into economic stability and vitality for entire communities. Undermining Social Security and pensions will cause a spike in elder poverty and hurt the economies of entire communities trying to recover from the coronavirus.

Public employees in red and blue states are on the frontlines of this pandemic, making sacrifices every day to treat patients, educate children and keep public services running. These workers have also played by the rules and actively contributed to their pensions. How can we now, as you propose, tell these heroes that they should not retire with dignity, and with full benefits earned after a lifetime of work? Slashing public pensions as you suggest would put retirement security out of reach for millions of Americans. Instead of protecting corporate interests and wealthy CEOs during this crisis, the Senate should be standing up for the working people helping America through this pandemic.

The federal government should provide states with urgently needed relief during this crisis, to be used as needed to address budget shortfalls that have occurred because the only way to deal with the virus is to have paused the economy, and therefore crater state and local tax revenues. States and local governments and schools have been the frontlines in dealing with this pandemic, and continue to face enormous obligations to the individuals and families they serve. Pandemic-related drops in tax revenues and increased costs have caused unexpected and unprecedented budget shortfalls in all 50 states, which are now struggling to fund public services. To cut funding to states now would be to turn your back on public employees and the Americans they serve, and would disproportionately affect older Americans when they are at their most vulnerable.

Finally, it is essential to take immediate steps to protect our election system and ensure that all voters can cast their ballots without jeopardizing their health and safety. Seniors who face difficulties getting to the polls or do not want to risk exposure to COVID-19 on Election Day should have the option of voting by mail or dropping off a hand-marked paper ballot. In addition, federal assistance is needed to ensure on-site polling locations


³ <https://www.nirsonline.org/reports/pensionomics-2018-measuring-the-economic-impact-of-defined-benefit-pension-expenditures/>

⁴ <https://www.nirsonline.org/reports/fortifying-main-street-the-economic-benefit-of-public-pension-dollars-in-small-towns-and-rural-america/>

have adequate safety measures in place. At a time of great financial crisis, states need federal financial assistance to ensure that safe and fair elections take place. We urge you to support the Resilient Elections During Quarantines and Natural Disasters Act of 2020 (S. 3529) introduced by Sens. Ron. Wyden (D-Ore.) and Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.). This legislation would protect our elections. The damage and destruction caused by the coronavirus should not undermine what is fundamental to our democracy.

The coronavirus pandemic has thrown the U.S. economy into turmoil, left millions of workers unemployed and put public health and safety at risk at a scale not seen in generations. The crisis has underscored the vulnerability of older Americans in particular, and we are calling on you to help all states overcome the precipitous drop in revenues while also funding the programs and services on the federal level that protect the health, safety and economic security of seniors, and that safeguard our democracy.

Sincerely,



Randi Weingarten
President, AFT

Debra Penny, TRSNYC, Co-Chair of the AFT Trustee Council

Sharon Hendricks, CalSTRS, Co-Chair of the AFT Trustee Council

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cc: The Honorable Charles Schumer, NY;
United States Senate