



www.few.org



455 Massachusetts Ave. NW, P.O. Box 306
Washington, DC 20001
Phone: 202/898-0994
Fax: 202/898-1535

***This information may be provided to
FEW membership via government email***

FEW Washington Legislative Update February 15-28, 2021

In Congress

The U.S. House of Representatives in the early morning hours of February 27, 2021, passed ([H.R. 1319](#)), the "American Rescue Plan Act of 2021." The legislation is estimated by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) to increase the deficit by \$1.92 trillion over 10 years-more than the \$1.889 trillion provided in the operable budget resolution. The Joint Committee of Taxation separately provided [revenue estimates](#) of the tax provisions in the legislation.

It would also [provide](#) 15 weeks of paid leave for federal employees who are unable to work due to COVID-19 symptoms or self-isolation orders and those who need to care for a child whose school or daycare center is closed or relying on virtual learning. Federal and postal workers caring for someone who contracted the coronavirus or with a family member at least 65 years old who is impacted by the pandemic would also be eligible for the time off.

The bill now heads to the Senate, where the Senate Majority is expected to use a process known as "reconciliation" to overcome objections. The legislative text will require some tweaking, as, for example, Senators will have to remove or alter a provision raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 per hour due to the limits of the parliamentary procedure they are using. The fate of the leave for federal employees-which came with a \$570 million price tag in the House bill-could also hang in the balance, though it may not become clear until later this week when Senate leadership is expected to release its version of the relief package. Provisions in a reconciliation bill must have sufficient budgetary impact to be included, as determined by the Senate parliamentarian.

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Paid Leave:

The House has passed a wide-ranging bill on pandemic relief and economic stimulus (HR-1319) that would create a special fund for providing paid leave to federal employees who have used up their sick leave.

Agencies could draw on the \$570 million fund to provide up to 600 hours of paid leave to employees who continue to have needs related to personal or family health situations, school closings or unavailability of regular day care services. The bill also would put in law an existing Labor Department policy of presuming that Coronavirus infections of federal employees in certain front-line positions are work-related for purposes of FECA benefits.

The bill now moves to the Senate, where prospects for passage are less clear, given disputes over certain other provisions including raising the federal minimum wage. There is pressure to reach a resolution within the next two weeks, however, ahead of the expiration of certain unemployment benefits the bill would extend.

The House has now turned to HR-1, a high-priority measure for Majority leaders there which contains a number of provisions related to voter registration, campaign financing and ethics policies for political appointees. The bill also would reauthorize the Office of Government Ethics, strengthen its independence and investigative powers and set new standards for ethics training.

Sourced from [FEDWeek](#).

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Federal Employee Health Benefits (FEHB):

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has said that as medical issues related to the pandemic evolve, the FEHB program will change with it and in the meantime, it is asking carriers to look into mental health among other considerations that have arisen in the past year.

“During the COVID-19 pandemic, OPM and FEHB carriers have worked together to ensure that all FEHB enrollees have equitable access to diagnostic tests, therapeutics, vaccines, and telehealth coverage,” it said in its call letter to carriers in preparation for the 2022 plan year.

“OPM will continue to work with FEHB carriers to help safeguard the health of FEHB members, provide necessary COVID-related coverage and address issues of health and social inequity to prevent and remedy differences in COVID-19 care outcomes [...] OPM will issue further guidance as prevention and treatment methodologies evolve,” it said.

It said that self-quarantine, isolating, shelter-in-place and social distancing have had an impact on all Americans, “but especially persons suffering from mental and behavioral health conditions such as depression, anxiety, or substance use disorders (SUDs). For many with these conditions, forced isolation can further exacerbate the condition and, for those in recovery for SUD, can be a powerful trigger to relapse.”

“OPM strongly encourages FEHB carriers to focus on the provision of mental health benefits by continual monitoring of both provider access and availability. FEHB carriers should contract with providers who ensure care coordination during transitions (e.g. movement of patients between levels of care, at hospital discharge). FEHB carriers should leverage ongoing telehealth expansion to address provider shortages while educating members regarding the availability of these services,” it said.

OPM also strongly encouraged carriers to “continue to improve access and reimbursement for integrated mental health, substance use and primary care services. Carriers are also expected to address in their plan proposals what stigma reduction strategies they will be using, such as enhanced provider and member education.”

OPM last fall said that the pandemic somewhat eased the upward pressure on premiums for the 2021 plan year because enrollees were postponing care out of concerns about going into medical offices. A recent IG report found decreases in screenings and other preventive treatments for that reason, raising warnings about the potential health impacts.

Sourced from [FEDWeek](#).

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Gender Equality & Men's Support:

LEWIS, the global marketing agency, today revealed findings from its new global research on gender inequality, conducted in support of the global HeForShe movement. The report shows the impact and perceptions of gender inequities during the pandemic across 13 countries. The findings reveal an alarming trend: 98 percent of women want men to help address gender inequality issues, yet less than half of men indicated being ready to help.

"The problem of widespread gender inequality is no secret, but our latest research is a powerful reminder that the advances the world has made to combat this discrimination can be easily lost if we are not careful," said Yvonne van Bokhoven, executive vice president at LEWIS. "We need everyone, men and women, to take steps now to empower women by speaking up, being allies and working to address systemic gender inequalities."

Acknowledging the problem isn't enough. Women are looking for active support to combat inequality. Nearly 4 in 10 (39 percent) women say men should speak out

against gender inequality when they witness it. One third (33 percent) want men to take on more household duties.

The disproportionate impact of COVID on women is abundantly clear:

- More stress: 24 percent of women reported they were required to take on new duties as part of their job compared to 22 percent of men. Women also indicated seeing a greater increase in their housework and childcare responsibilities compared to their male counterparts.
- Fewer benefits: Male employees said they saw more opportunities for financial raises (13 percent) than did female employees (11 percent), and over a quarter of women agree they have been overlooked for a promotion because they have children versus 16 percent of men.
- Job insecurity: 14 percent of women surveyed reported being furloughed during the pandemic compared to 11 percent of men, exacerbating an already significant gap between employment and economic opportunities between male and female counterparts.

The survey also revealed that businesses need to address the stark contrast between how gender inequalities are perceived by men and women respectively:

- Lack of awareness: Male employees were more than twice as likely as female colleagues to say that gender inequality is no longer an issue facing women.
- Speaking out: Nearly half of women say they want men to speak out against gender inequality when they witness it and to listen more to female colleagues about the issue, while only 28 percent of men reported feeling the same.
- Parenting matters: Parents of daughters are more engaged in the issue than parents of sons. Twenty-six percent are more likely to discuss gender inequality issues at work and 30 percent are more likely to discuss gender inequality issues at home.

"You don't need to personally be a victim of discrimination to understand why we need to fight it," said Chris Lewis, CEO of LEWIS. "It's clear that men can – and should – do more to help. Our hope is this research will help shine a light on the challenges women face to make all of us stronger allies in the fight against inequality."

"What this research emphasizes is the need to take action now more than ever" said Edward Wageni, Global Head of HeForShe. "COVID-19 has only exacerbated gender inequalities across the globe and we each have a role to play to ensure that not only do we build back better, but we also build back equal."

To read the full report, please visit: <https://www.teamlewis.com/heforshe/>

Sourced from [PRNewsWire](#).

FEW receives information from the following sources and contacts: Federal News Network, GovernmentExecutive, CNN, FedWeek, and PRNewsWire.