

Using Tax-Based Policies to Support Workers & Families During the COVID-19 Recession: The Urgent Need for Additional Measures

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Testimony before the United States House of Representatives

Committee on Ways & Means

Subcommittee on Select Revenue Measures

June 18, 2020

I thank Isabella Camacho-Craft, Kali Grant, Cassidy Viser, Sheila Naughton, Nima Rahimi, Aileen Carr, Cara Brumfield, and Siddhartha Aneja for assistance in preparing this testimony.

This document was corrected for clarity on June 30, 2020.

Introduction

Thank you, Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Smith, and members of the subcommittee. My name is Indivar Dutta-Gupta, and I am the Co-Executive Director at the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality. We are a nonpartisan policy research center at Georgetown University focused on expanding economic inclusion in the United States, with a crosscutting focus on racial and gender equity. I am also a former House Ways and Means Committee staffer. During my time there, I helped advance Congressional efforts to expand the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC), as well as unemployment benefits, in the wake of the 2008 Financial Crisis. A key lesson learned from that time is that policymakers must avoid ending anti-recessionary spending prematurely. Workers and families will need increased support until economic conditions approach or return to pre-crisis levels. I am honored to come before this subcommittee to speak to the importance of leveraging our tax system to support working people and families struggling in the face of this extraordinary public health and economic crisis.

Overview

Despite some crucial actions by Congress to date, the depth and breadth of the COVID-19 public health and economic crises warrant additional measures that are substantial and sustained. The nature of the recession we are in argues for marshalling a wide range of strategies, including tax policies, to prevent families from experiencing economic ruin. Tax-based measures should be both targeted and wider-reaching. Additional transfers like the Recovery Rebates, along with strengthened refundable tax credits, can help equip individuals and families with the resources necessary to weather the crisis and ensure a faster, more robust recovery.

When households and state and local governments are cutting back on spending, the federal government alone can and must spend more. Harvard Professor and former IMF Chief Economist Ken Rogoff, who has previously raised concerns about public debt,¹ affirmed this need for prolonged deficit spending, calling \$10 trillion in additional deficit spending an amount he “wouldn’t even blink at.”² The last three Federal Reserve Chairs, including Chairman Jay Powell, appointed by President Trump, as well as former Chairpersons Janet Yellen and Ben Bernanke, appointed by President Barack Obama and President George W. Bush, respectively, have also called for sizeable additional fiscal stimulus.^{3, 4} Deficit spending today, including through tax-based transfers like a new round of Recovery Rebates and expansions of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Child Tax Credit (CTC), and Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC), will not only hasten what is likely to be an otherwise lengthy recovery, but will also help ensure that it is equitable.

In my testimony, I make three overarching points:

- 1. The early federal policy response was an essential down payment;**
- 2. Workers and families need far more support until economic conditions improve considerably;**
and
- 3. Tax policy should play a key role in supporting workers, families, and the overall economy.**

Policies that ensure a minimum level of cash resources for people to survive this devastating recession will help all Americans, especially people who have been marginalized for generations. The tax code has a major role to play in helping this nation realize that goal and obligation.

1. The Early Federal Policy Response was an Essential Down Payment

First, we should acknowledge some key policies enacted by Congress since the pandemic began that have helped support working people and families, including worker supports, cash and other in-kind assistance, housing assistance and protections, and modest state fiscal supports.

Worker Supports Helped Absorb the Shock & Preserve Labor Force Attachment

Extended, expanded, and enhanced emergency unemployment benefits have allowed tens of millions of jobless workers and their families to absorb the initial economic shocks of the pandemic. Payroll support through a variety of programs has helped limit layoffs.⁵ In particular, the Paycheck Protection Program supplies potentially forgivable loans to some businesses to help keep their workers on the payroll.⁶ Together, the establishment of COVID-19-focused paid sick days and paid leave and refundable tax credits for employers to cover qualified paid sick and family leave wages⁷ have allowed some workers to take the time off they need to care for themselves and their loved ones and helped employers retain some workers.

Cash & Other In-Kind Assistance Helped Bridge Some Foundational Needs & Boosted the Economy

One-time Recovery Rebates (Economic Impact Payments) provided up to \$1,200 for individuals with Social Security numbers, plus \$500 for dependents under age 16, based on tax filing for Calendar Year 2018 or 2019 income. Modest emergency expansions of nutrition assistance did provide some relief to families suddenly facing food insecurity.⁸ Temporary student borrower support waived all interest from federally-supported student loans and provided automatic administrative forbearance for those individuals who do not repay student loans through September 30, 2020. (Employer tuition assistance programs were already permitted to offer \$5,250 of tax-free income to pay tuition and they can now also cover student loan payments made before December 31, 2020.⁹)

Housing Assistance Delayed Evictions & Provided Other Support

Temporary eviction restrictions prohibited the eviction of renters living in single-family and multi-family properties financed by federally backed mortgages for 120 days (through July 24, 2020). The Urban Institute estimates that this will apply to more than one in four rental units (12.3 million people, or 28 percent).¹⁰

Emergency housing funding provisions allocated \$4 billion for temporary emergency shelters, rapid rehousing, housing counseling, and rental deposit assistance for people experiencing or at risk of

homelessness; \$300 million to address tribal housing issues; \$65 million for Housing for Persons with AIDS; \$50 million for Section 202 Housing for the Elderly; and \$15 million for Section 811 Housing for Persons With Disabilities.¹¹

Modest State Fiscal Support Averted Some Layoffs

The CARES Act authorized an increase of 6.2 percentage points in federal Medicaid matching funds (Federal Medical Assistance Percentage, or FMAP) available from January 1, 2020 through the quarter in which the public health emergency period ends.¹² The CARES Act also included payments to the states for State, Territory, and Tribal Child Care and Development Fund Lead Agencies which can be used to provide continued payments to child care providers in the case of decreased enrollment or closures related to coronavirus and to provide child care assistance to health care sector employees, emergency responders, sanitation workers, and other workers deemed essential during the response to COVID-19.

More Work Lies Ahead

These measures—however unprecedented they may seem—fail to match in duration or depth the financial struggles families are facing and will be facing through 2021. While upwards of 35 million workers are likely receiving or waiting to receive unemployment benefits,^{13, 14} the child care sector is on the verge of collapse, requiring no less than \$50 billion additional dollars;^{15, 16} and as many as 28 million households face unstable housing and are at risk of eviction.^{17, 18, 19, 20}

Furthermore, official unemployment numbers do not reflect all the workers who have lost jobs because of this crisis; in mid-May, for instance, there were 32.5 million workers who were either officially unemployed or were out of work as a result of the virus but were being counted as either employed or out of the labor force.²¹ The Congressional Budget Office's updated current policy baseline projects an 11.5 percent overall unemployment rate at the end of 2020.²² Black workers may face even higher rates—Black unemployment rates have historically been roughly double that of Whites.^{23, 24}

2. Workers & Families Need Far More Financial Support Until Economic Conditions Improve Considerably

We face an economic crisis many magnitudes worse than the 2008 financial crisis. Individuals and families face record levels of job loss and economic hardship even as they grapple with a deadly virus. The breadth, depth, and inherent uncertainty of the COVID-19 public health and economic crises require comprehensive and sustained solutions to support struggling families and pave the way to economic recovery. With increased federal spending rapidly turning into deficit reduction after enactment of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, our economy needed 89 months to close the jobs gap following the 2008 Financial Crisis.²⁵ In other words, it took nearly *seven and a half years* to create enough jobs to recover from the jobs lost and absorb new workers during the last recession. Policymakers have a chance to avert repeating that same prolonged crisis of unemployment and human suffering.

Economic Insecurity is Deep & Widespread

The effects of the rapid job loss and reduced economic activity caused by the health and safety measures necessary to save hundreds of thousands of lives have spread far and wide, if unevenly. Before the crisis, underemployment, poor wages, an inadequate caregiving infrastructure, and unaffordable health care and housing, among other challenges, meant that tens of millions of people were struggling to afford basic living standards, let alone positioned financially to endure months without adequate income. According to the Urban Institute, nearly 40 percent of adults had trouble meeting their basic needs of food, health care, housing, or utilities in 2017.²⁶ Polling indicated that nearly 40 percent of adults did not have confidence that they could pay a \$1,000 emergency expense in 2019—before the pandemic plunged families into unprecedented struggles.²⁷

An astonishing number of workers have lost their jobs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, with Black and non-Black Latinx workers disproportionately affected. Despite small gains in May, U.S. workers are still experiencing unprecedented job loss and unemployment rates. As of early June, job losses during the pandemic amounted to nearly 20 million.²⁸ More than one in five workers are participating in Unemployment Insurance (UI) or have applied and are waiting to participate in UI.²⁹ Women, particularly Black women and non-Black Latinx women, have been hit especially hard by job loss. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, nearly 60 percent of the jobs lost in March were held by women,³⁰ and 55 percent of the jobs lost in April were held by women.³¹ The National Women's Law Center has reported that unemployment for Black women actually increased slightly in May when it fell slightly for other groups.³² Latinx women were the group most likely to be laid off during the pandemic and continue to face record unemployment.³³

Such unprecedented job loss has paved the way for deep, widespread economic insecurity and hardship. As of late May, most Black and Latinx people did not feel high confidence in their ability to pay rent and expected to lose income for the month of June.³⁴ Rates of food insecurity have increased dramatically since the onset of the crisis in mid-March. Research from Northwestern University found that national food insecurity has more than doubled since the onset of the national emergency.³⁵ By the end of April 2020, more than one in five households were food insecure and two in five households with mothers with children under age 12 were food insecure³⁶—rates of food insecurity higher than those during the 2008 Financial Crisis.³⁷ These crises will have a lasting impact on children, as experiencing poverty during childhood is particularly damaging.³⁸

Child poverty was a major problem even before the crisis and it was coupled with a downward trend in the share of federal dollars spent on children.³⁹ According to an unpublished analysis by the Center on Poverty and Social Policy, the American Family Act, a one-year version of which is included in the HEROES Act, would expand the Child Tax Credit and cut the child poverty rate by 42 percent (from 13.7 percent to 7.9 percent) and cut the poverty rate among Black children in half (from 23.7 percent to 11.4 percent), based on a pre-COVID-19 baseline.⁴⁰

Economic Insecurity will Worsen without Additional Measures

Unemployment and job loss projections through 2021 show that the economic fallout of this ongoing crisis will likely continue well into the future. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) has projected a 15 percent unemployment rate through the second and third quarters of 2020, a substantial increase from less than 4 percent in the first quarter.⁴¹ This increase reflects the net effect of a projected loss of nearly 27 million in the number of people employed and the exit of roughly 8 million people from the labor force.⁴²

A return to robust economic activity is impossible without effective public health responses, which are by nature uneven and uncertain. No one knows when health and public health treatments will allow a full economic recovery to begin, but it appears highly unlikely that we will see enough jobs return to meet demand by the end of this year, let alone this summer. The Federal Reserve has projected a 9.3 percent unemployment rate at the end of 2020 and expects the unemployment rate to remain elevated for years.⁴³ We may not see pre-crisis level unemployment rates until later than 2022.⁴⁴ And some research indicates that nearly a third of US job losses is at risk of becoming permanent.⁴⁵

Yet, despite the worst economic conditions in generations, several key federal economic support programs are positioned to end soon or in the coming months. For example, the new FPUC that provides \$600 for unemployment assistance participants and eviction moratoriums both expire in July 2020. One analysis projects a 40 to 45 percent increase in homelessness by the end of 2020.⁴⁶ And the Recovery Rebates, which according to a Bankrate survey, about 80 percent of people said were either somewhat or very important to their financial well-being,⁴⁷ were a one-time payment. Additional relief measures are needed to prevent further hardship for families and facilitate longer term economic recovery.

The Pandemic & Recession are Exacerbating Racial & Economic Inequities

Because the crisis is affecting households unevenly, targeted responses should be part of a broader policy response. For example, data clearly show that the COVID-19 virus is hitting Black and Indigenous communities disproportionately hard. Residents of majority-Black counties face three times the rate of COVID-19 infection and almost six times the rate of dying from the virus than residents of majority white counties.⁴⁸ Indigenous communities also face heightened risk: as of early June, the Navajo nation had a higher per-capita rate of COVID-19 cases than any state in the United States, according to the Navajo Department of Health data.^{49, 50}

Black and Indigenous people face barriers to health care access and have greater rates of preexisting conditions brought on by systemic factors such as poverty, structural inequality, and housing vulnerability, making them particularly hard hit by both the health and financial aspects the pandemic.⁵¹ About two in 10 Native Americans/American Indians (22 percent) and one in 10 Black people lack health insurance.⁵² Black and Latinx communities are more likely to breathe polluted air than White communities.⁵³ Increased exposure to pollution—itsself associated with increased rates of mortality from COVID-19,⁵⁴ is linked to increased risk of chronic lung condition⁵⁵ and exacerbates pre-existing asthma,⁵⁶ risk factors for severe illness from COVID-19.⁵⁷

Many Black workers who have not lost employment are on the frontlines, providing essential services and risking their health and their families' health to earn a living. Black workers make up a disproportionate share—one in six (17 percent)—of essential workers.⁵⁸

These disparities are the result of entrenched racist policies and practices that create barriers to health equity⁵⁹ and economic security.⁶⁰ Since the burdens of disease, death, and economic distress related to the pandemic are disproportionately borne by Black and Indigenous people, the government responses must be designed to invest resources in the policies and programs that will be most responsive to their needs and experiences.

Unfortunately, the early federal response likely compounded existing racial and economic inequities by providing uneven relief. For example, while the Recovery Rebates did help people meet their immediate needs, they still leave out many, including people who have difficulty accessing banks, immigrant families and mixed status families who file with ITINs, many young adults who fall into the coverage gap, and adult dependents, including adult dependents with disabilities. Nearly 12 million people are at risk of missing out on the Recovery Rebates because they do not file taxes, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.⁶¹ Additionally, people who owe back child support may not see their entire CARES Act Recovery Rebate—the payment can be docked by the amount they owe. What's more, small business owners applying for SBA loans could become ineligible if they owe back child support.⁶² Provisions in the HEROES Act would help rectify these counterproductive policies, in turn doing far more to address economic insecurity.

3. Tax Policy Should Play a Key Role in Supporting Workers, Families, & the Overall Economy

The role of the federal tax code in distributing the benefits and burdens of American life cannot be understated. While tax policies frequently reward the wealthy and exclude low-income workers and families and communities of color,^{63, 64} improvements to refundable tax credits and other tax transfers can support workers and families and shore up the economy during this time of crisis. The federal government must make a significant investment in improvements to the tax code to ensure a durable and equitable recovery for families, communities, businesses, and the economy. Strengthening refundable tax credits to meet the size and scale of the COVID-19 crisis would provide individuals and families with the resources necessary to weather the crisis and ensure that our nation has the resources for a faster, durable recovery.

The Tax System Can Efficiently & Effectively Reach Workers & Their Families

The IRS is relatively efficient and effective at transferring cash to households, though the agency needs more funding to improve administration. Millions of taxpayers every year claim the EITC and CTC, which have high participation rates, and can do so on one federal tax return rather than the far more complex application processes for direct spending programs such as SNAP or TANF.⁶⁵ The tax system is far more

effective than TANF, which contributes to racial disparities and is particularly ill-suited to respond in times of increased need as currently structured.⁶⁶

Refundable Tax Credits Have a Demonstrated Track Record in Addressing Inequality & Expanding Economic Security & Opportunity

The EITC and CTC boost low income families' economic security and increase gender and racial equity. These tax credits provide tax refunds that supplement low pay, support workforce participation, and promote economic stability more generally. The EITC and the CTC are the two refundable tax credits with the greatest impact on low- and moderate-income families. In fact, the EITC is targeted to help low- and moderate-income workers⁶⁷ and concentrates a larger share of its benefits on lower income families. Nearly 90 percent of EITC are targeted towards families with the lowest incomes.⁶⁸ Notably, Recovery Rebates were designed as a form of refundable tax credit with no earnings phase-in, allowing families with the greatest need to receive a maximum benefit.

Refundable tax credits boost families' incomes and improve health, education, and employment outcomes for children in those families. Infants born to mothers who received large EITC increases had fewer low-weight births and premature births.⁶⁹ EITC benefits are also associated with modest improvements in children's social and emotional well-being.⁷⁰ Children in families that receive these tax credits perform better in school, are more likely to attend college, and can be expected to earn more as adults.^{71, 72} There is some evidence that, at the same income level, such gains from added income may be larger for children of color.⁷³

The positive effects of refundable tax credits are particularly meaningful for women of color. Women of color face significant wage disparities^{74, 75} and persistent discrimination in the labor market⁷⁶ when compared to white women and men, and make up a disproportionate share of low paid workers. Analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in 2019 found that the EITC boosted the incomes of 9 million women of color, and the refundable CTC boosted the incomes of 7.25 million women of color.⁷⁷

Refundable Tax Credits Should be Expanded in Response to the Recession

Workers and families would benefit from strengthened refundable tax credits, including the EITC, CTC, CDCTC, and additional Recovery Rebates. Strengthening these tax credits to meet the size and scale of the COVID-19 crisis would provide individuals and families with the resources necessary to weather the crisis and ensure that our nation has the resources for a faster, durable recovery. It would also boost state and local economies, particularly when the economy is shrinking.

Policymakers Should Strengthen the EITC & CTC

The EITC and CTC are essential supports for working people and families. They also support the larger economy. By targeting resources to the most cash-strapped populations, the EITC quickly boosts the economy, because people who need the money the most are likely to spend money the fastest in order to meet their basic needs.⁷⁸ However, they leave out some of those who need support the most, limiting

their power. There are a number of steps that can be taken to make the EITC and CTC more inclusive, flexible, and aligned more closely with need.

First, policymakers should allow filers to use their income from either 2019 or 2020 when calculating their EITC and Child Tax Credits, and the credits should be made available to people without a Social Security Number.

Second, the age range for workers without qualified children should be expanded from those aged 25 to 64 to include workers aged 18 and up. People under age 25 make up a significant portion of these workers in sectors that have been hit particularly hard by the pandemic—including hospitality, retail, and entertainment.⁷⁹ Young people entering the workforce for the first time during this economic downturn are at a significant disadvantage. Workers are staying in the workforce longer and older workers have also been hit hard by the pandemic.⁸⁰

Third, these programs must provide benefits that are aligned with the extraordinary needs that workers and families are facing today. Job loss and hours reductions as a result of stay at home orders and other efforts to stem the spread of COVID-19 have made it impossible for some workers to earn the income they need to qualify for these credits while simultaneously increasing their need for the support they provide. To help meet workers' income needs, the maximum EITC amount should be increased and the earned income requirement should be removed.

Together these changes would give more people access to these tax credits—which research shows reduce poverty, promote work, and support well-being of children and adults alike.⁸¹ These proposed expansions are well targeted to help those with the least income, and would be especially beneficial for essential workers, such as home health aides and frontline food service workers like cashiers and people who work in food preparation.⁸²

Lastly, the programs should be made available to residents of Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico was already experiencing a financial crisis before the COVID-19 pandemic and is still recovering from a devastating hurricane. The people of Puerto Rico need and deserve access to these important income supports.

Policymakers Should Address Caregiving Needs, including through an Improved CDCTC

The CDCTC currently provides a maximum of a \$1,050 nonrefundable tax credit to families with children under age 13 children to support childcare for one child and a maximum of a \$2,100 nonrefundable tax credit to support childcare for multiple children.⁸³ Improvements such as those described in the HEROES Act, would help more families meet their caregiving needs, which is particularly important for women and single parents. Specifically, improved CDCTCs would help families meet child care expenses and would allow for tax refunds in the current crisis.⁸⁴

To improve the CDCTC, policymakers should make the credit fully refundable. Paired with investments through the Child Care and Development Block Grant, making the credit refundable would help working families meet the high cost of child care. Other improvements, such as increasing the maximum percentage of expenses, increasing the income level to qualify for the maximum percentage of

expenses, increasing expense limits, and indexing the credits to inflation would make this credit more valuable to families. To be sure, policymakers should also enact no less than \$50 billion in immediate relief to prevent collapse of the child care sector.⁸⁵ Recent estimates suggest that at least 9.6 billion is needed each month to sustain current child care providers during the COVID crisis.⁸⁶

Policymakers Should Provide Additional Recovery Rebates

Workers and families need additional and sustained income support in the form of ongoing cash assistance. Early data from Northwestern University indicate that, on average, people who receive their one-time Recovery Rebates are spending a third of their checks within 10 days, often on groceries, food, and catching up on rent and bill payments.⁸⁷ Individuals with lower liquidity (\$500 or less in their checking account) were more likely to spend their check faster than those with higher liquidity.⁸⁸ Survey data indicate that one round of Recovery Rebates have been helpful but inadequate;⁸⁹ about one-third (31 percent) of people believe the checks will sustain them for one month; another third (32 percent) of people believe the checks will sustain them for one to three months. These spending behaviors and survey findings indicate that additional cash supports are needed to meet basic weekly and monthly expenses during this lengthy crisis.

Policymakers must also widen the Recovery Rebates' reach by making sure they are accessible to all who need them. This includes expanding eligibility to cover families who file with ITIN numbers,⁹⁰ older youth, and adult dependents, including full-time students (which, together, will eliminate the coverage gap for students over the ages of 16 and help caregivers who care for adult dependents, including adult dependents with disabilities); as well as expanding automatic payments whenever the Treasury Department can access necessary information for a household and the option to use fee-free debit cards for individuals without bank accounts.

Policymakers Should Leverage Tax Administration to Provide Payroll Support

The HEROES Act augments employee and employer protections initially established by the CARES Act. Under the proposed legislation, the refundable employee retention tax credit increases from 50 percent to 80 percent of qualified wages, and increases the total cap from \$5,000 per employee to a new cap of \$12,000 per employee in any calendar quarter and \$36,000 per employee in a calendar year. Such a policy would better allow workers to remain in the labor market and attached to their employer, speeding up return-to-work when public health conditions and protections permit it. This approach may be more equitable than the Paycheck Protection Program, which appears to have done little for rural, minority, and women-owned businesses.⁹¹

Conclusion

The actions Congress takes—or fails to take—in the coming weeks will determine whether we save from financial ruin and unbearable hardship millions of workers and families who have sacrificed their livelihoods to keep their families and communities safe. The well-being of the vast majority of people in this country depends in large part on a new, substantial, and sustained federal fiscal response. Our lowest paid workers, Indigenous people, Black families, and other people of color are especially at risk if

we fail to provide support as we work to control the virus. Our lowest-paid workers, Indigenous people, Black families, and other people of color are especially at risk if we fail to provide support as we work to control the virus. People of all ages face entirely preventable joblessness, evictions, foreclosures, hunger, stunted educational outcomes, and even death and disease. Fortunately, policymakers have at their disposal the very policy tools that can avoid these outcomes, close racial disparities, and construct an economy that is resilient and more prosperous than before.

Generations to come will remember and judge us by the strength of our policy response going forward. Tax policy, with its ability to reach tens of millions of struggling households with speed and efficiency, is a vital tool in fighting the pandemic and recession. By helping people afford to maintain physical distancing, supporting families' mental health,⁹² and improving children's long-term health,⁹³ tax policy is public health policy. Policymakers would be wise to use every tool at their disposal to fight a virus threatening the lives of a million or more Americans, beyond the 116,000 or more who have already died from COVID-19.⁹⁴ Together with other key policy changes—including expansions to SNAP and UI, and increased support for child care, paid leave, and state and local governments—tax policies can deliver relief and promote a sustained and robust recovery. Now is the time to push these levers as far as we effectively can.

After economic conditions improve significantly, we also will need to raise substantial revenues to afford the public spending necessary for our economy. The COVID-19 crisis has reminded many of us and revealed for others that our economy relies on public health, caregiving, schools, underpaid workers, and more. As a nation, we were ill-equipped for the financial fallout of this pandemic due to our failure to establish a national paid leave program, ensure a vigorous unemployment benefits system, and develop a healthy child care and long-term care infrastructure.⁹⁵ Each of these needs should be addressed for the longer-term as we eventually leave behind the very worst of this crisis. Doing so will require substantially greater revenues as the economy improves. The alternative is an under-resourced social infrastructure that leaves national needs unmet, and people, communities, and the economy in jeopardy. If we ensure that our federal tax code raises adequate revenues in the future, creates equitable and effective incentives for economic decisions and activities, and delivers needed supports to families, then policymakers can help ensure that this recession is the last to catch us flat-footed.

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