



*Empowerment Programs*

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TESTIMONY *of*

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**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COLORED PEOPLE**

**(NAACP)**

*on*

**H.R. 6909, THE PANDEMIC HEROES COMPENSATION ACT OF 2020**

*before the*

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM**

*Wednesday, June 10, 2020*

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Maloney, Ranking Member Jordan, and other members of this esteemed body. Thank you so much for asking me here today and for seeking out the policy position of the NAACP on this important legislation; I am sorry that I cannot address you in person. The NAACP greatly appreciates your efforts on behalf of the men and women who have helped us as we attempt to survive this quarantine.

The legislation that is the subject of this hearing, H.R. 6909, *the Pandemic Heroes Compensation Act of 2020*, is as inspired as it is meritorious and necessary. This bipartisan,

bicameral legislation which is modeled after the successful September 11<sup>th</sup> Victims' Compensation Fund, would provide compensation for injuries to any individual, or their families, who are deemed an essential worker and required to leave their home to perform their jobs and who have become ill or died as a result of exposure to COVID-19. Those eligible for these funds would be the first responders, the retail workers, the transit workers, the grocery store clerks, the delivery-men and women, the janitorial staff, the sanitation workers, mail carriers, and the federal, state and local employees who are deemed essential to make sure we are safe, fed, and healthy and are on the frontlines, risking their health and sometimes their lives. It only makes sense to help those who helped us in our time of need: it is the morally right thing to do.

And when you look at the make-up of the people who are cleaning our buildings, our grocery clerks and mail carriers, and driving our buses, it should come as no surprise that the NAACP stands with this cause as well. Despite the fact that African Americans make up just over 13 percent of the US population, we account for nearly 30 percent of bus drivers and nearly 20 percent of all food service workers, janitors, cashiers, and grocery stockers<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, people of color also work disproportionately as frontline nursing home workers, caregivers, and food processing workers.

Many of the essential workers are low-end wage workers, with little if any financial back-up, who need as much support as we can offer in the best of times, and now we are asking them to put their health, and even their lives, on the line. And because too many of them live in densely—populated areas or multi-generational situations<sup>2</sup>, they are not only risking their own health and lives: they are putting their friends, neighbors, loved ones, and families at risk as well.

As we all know, the virus will attack anyone: it does not recognize the race, ethnicity, gender, age, nor station in life of its victims, nor does it stay in one place or even region of our nation. Yet for a variety of reasons, including our disproportionate representation in many of the “essential” jobs, African Americans and other Americans of color are getting sick and dying in disparate rates.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/04/09/why-are-blacksdying-at-higher-rates-from-covid-19/>

<sup>2</sup>Data from the 2010 Decennial Census shows that 4 percent of family households in the U.S. are multigenerational family households. Of the multigenerational family households, Native Americans represent 14 percent, Hispanic Americans represent 11 percent, Asian Americans represent 9 percent, and African Americans represent 8 percent.

By the time of this hearing, almost two million Americans in every part of our nation will have been stricken with the Coronavirus. In its report issued late last month, APM research determined that the overall COVID-19 mortality rate for African Americans is 2.4 times as high as the rate for Whites and 2.2 times as high as the rate for Asians and Latinos<sup>3</sup>. In fact, if African Americans died from COVID-19 at the same rate as Whites, 13,000 more black Americans would be alive today<sup>4</sup>.

The virus is attacking both our lives and our livelihoods. By early June, 56 percent of African Americans had lost income from employment since mid-March, and that close to one-quarter of blacks reported sometimes or often not having enough to eat in the previous seven days, more than three times the proportion of Whites<sup>5</sup>. Some have expressed a reason to celebrate the most recent unemployment number, but to the NAACP an unemployment rate among African Americans nation-wide of above 16 percent is no reason to rejoice.

The NAACP sees it as our moral imperative to help those who have helped us so much in these unprecedented and trying times. Furthermore, it is due to the stark disparities - in who contracts the Coronavirus and who dies from it – that the NAACP has taken a strong interest in the creation of a compensation fund to help those who are affected by the disease and their families. Many of the victims, I should remind you, were stricken while performing their essential duties, doing their jobs. Such a fund would support essential workers affected by COVID-19 across the country in their recovery by providing critical financial assistance to help with medical costs, loss of employment, loss of business, replacement services, and, in the more dire cases, burial costs. Family members who share homes with essential workers and became sick through contact with him or her would also be eligible to file a claim.

The NAACP was also very supportive of the “Heroes Fund” created in H.R. 6800, the “*Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions Act*” (HEROS) Act, which passed the US House of Representatives on May 15, 2020, and is pending in the U.S. Senate. The “Heroes Fund” would provide \$200 billion in hazard pay to essential workers. Specifically, a fund would be established to provide essential workers and federal employees an

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<sup>3</sup> APM Research Labs. “The Color of Coronavirus: COVID-19 deaths by Race and Ethnicity”  
<https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> Coalition on Human Needs <https://www.chn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Unemployment-response-May-8-2020-statement.pdf>

additional \$13 per hour for work performed from Jan. 27, 2020, until 60 days after the coronavirus public health emergency ends. The premium pay would be capped at \$10,000 for essential workers earning less than \$200,000 annually and \$5,000 for those earning \$200,000 or more per year.

The measure would define essential work as work that is performed during the Covid-19 emergency, involves routine interaction with others, and doesn't include telework. The legislation further provides specific areas of work, including health care, emergency response, grocery stores, food production, and transportation. The premium pay would apply to federal employees whose work is public facing or requires them to report to a worksite where preventative measures aren't available.

In summation, the NAACP strongly supports the men and women who, on a daily basis, have risked their health and their lives so that many of us can continue to survive. We should provide them with additional compensation, as is mandated in the current HEROES legislation for their willingness and their bravery. It is also our duty as human beings, really, the least we can do, to compensate them for this selflessness if it causes them or their loved ones to fall ill.

H.R. 6909, *the Pandemic Heroes Compensation Act of 2020* is about common decency, and it truly does tell every essential worker that regardless of who they are or what they may look like, they are valuable, respected, and appreciated. That, after all, is what many Americans want, in the end. Respect.

I again thank the Committee and Chairwoman Maloney for her initiative and her insight in introducing this legislation and in calling this hearing. I welcome your questions and your thoughts.