



FRAMING THE WEEK

Wrapping up the first major legislative initiative of the Biden-Harris Administration and Democrat-controlled Congress, the House is expected to pass the **\$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act of 2021**, amended and approved by the Senate along party lines over the weekend, tomorrow (March 9) ahead of the March 14 expiration of federal unemployment benefits. With respect to the health-related provisions, the Senate-cleared package maintains most of the legislative language approved by the House in their substitute amendment. The changes consist of revisions to funding levels, reallocation of funding to specified programs, and the exclusion of certain provisions approved by the House ([WHG summary](#)).

Infrastructure

In the wake of his first major legislative victory, President Joe Biden is looking ahead to infrastructure, the next phase of the “two-step plan” he [outlined](#) on his first day in office. He is expected to unveil this “economic recovery” plan in the coming weeks. Last Congress, House Democrats advanced the Moving Forward Act ([H.R. 2](#)) – a \$1.5 trillion package to rebuild the country’s infrastructure and create jobs. The package would provide \$30 billion for **health care infrastructure**, including \$10 billion set aside for the construction and modernization of hospitals and medical facilities. In addition, the package would provide over \$100 billion to fund **broadband-related programs**, a pressing infrastructure need to support the country’s increased reliance on telehealth and virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The legislative path for a comprehensive infrastructure package is not yet clear, as Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV) said, in a recent [interview](#), he would not support Biden’s infrastructure package if Republicans are not included in the process. For now, we believe that Manchin’s statements reflect his preferences regarding initial phases of the process but do not completely rule out consideration of budget reconciliation later on. If reconciliation is not an option, the package would face substantial obstacles to passage due to likely robust Republican opposition, especially given Manchin’s own suggestion that the package be offset predominantly by tax increases.

Public Health

This week, Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee Chairwoman Patty Murray (D-WA) is expected to reintroduce the **Public Health Infrastructure Saves Lives Act**, which would establish a program at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to award formula and competitive grants to support core public health capabilities at state, territorial, and local health departments. The program would provide \$750 million in FY 2022, increasing investments incrementally to \$4.5 billion by FY 2026.

Dovetailing with this announcement, the Senate HELP Committee will [hear](#) from stakeholders tomorrow (March 9) about their experiences on the **frontlines of the COVID-19 response**. The panel will offer different perspectives from a community health center, health system, state health department, and pandemic preparedness and response expert. With FY 2022 appropriations top of mind, witnesses will likely highlight the need for significant investments in public health infrastructure – an issue that the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Issues (Labor-HHS-Education) [discussed](#) a few weeks ago. The Q&A portion is also likely to cover how the soon-to-be-enacted COVID-19 relief package will support public health activities, particularly mass vaccination campaigns.

Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder

On Thursday (March 10), the House Appropriations LHHS Subcommittee will [examine](#) increased mental health services and substance use disorder treatment needs exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Members will hear from a diverse panel of mental and behavioral health care providers and policy experts. Their discussion is likely to touch on the use of funding included in the COVID-19 relief package to address mental health and substance use disorder.

Health and Economic Equity

As part of the House Ways and Means Committee’s work to address the role that racism, ableism, and other social, structural, and political determinants have in perpetuating health and economic inequity, the Committee will convene a [hearing](#) on Wednesday (March 10) to examine [Health Profession Opportunity Grants \(HPOG\)](#). Through the Administration for Children and Families, HPOGs are awarded to organizations to provide health care education and training to recipients of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and other individuals with low incomes.

Cabinet Confirmations

Tomorrow, the Senate is scheduled to vote, and likely confirm, the nominations of Marcia Fudge and Merrick Garland to serve as the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and the Attorney General, respectively. A vote on the nomination of Xavier Becerra, Biden’s pick to lead the Department of Health and Human Services, has not yet been scheduled.

THIS WEEK IN HEALTH POLICY

Tue. (3/9)

- **10:00am – Hearing: COVID-19** – The Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee convenes a hearing titled, “Examining Our COVID-19 Response: An Update from the Frontlines.” [Details.](#)

Wed. (3/10)

- **2:00pm – Hearing: Health Care Workforce** – The House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Worker and Family Support convenes a hearing titled, “Health Profession Opportunity Grants: Past Successes and Future Uses.” [Details.](#)

Thurs. (3/11)

- **9:00am – Hearing: Food Insecurity** – The House Agriculture Committee convenes a hearing titled, “A Look at Food Insecurity in America.” [Details.](#)
- **10:00am – Hearing: Mental and Behavioral Health** – The House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies convenes a hearing titled, “COVID-19 and the Mental Health and Substance Use Crises.” [Details.](#)

FEATURED WHG ANALYSIS

- ***NEW* WHG Summary of Biden-Harris Executive Actions Related to Health Equity and Racial Justice** – In the Policy Hub Insight Bank [here.](#)
- **WHG Catalogue of COVID-19 Government Response** – February Edition – In the Policy Hub Insight Bank [here.](#)
- **WHG Issue Brief: No Surprises Act Implementation** – In the Policy Hub Insight Bank [here.](#)
- **WHG: Implementation Timeline of the Omnibus Package** – In the Policy Hub Insight Bank [here.](#)
- **WHG Legislative and Regulatory Outlook for 2021** – In the Policy Hub Insight Bank [here.](#)
- **WHG: Regulatory Freeze: Key Policies and Dates** – In the Policy Hub Insight Bank [here.](#)

CONGRESSIONAL LOOKBACK

Fri. (3/5)

- **MedPAC [convened](#)** virtually for Day Two of its March 2021 public meeting and held sessions on vaccine coverage and payment, separately payable drugs, and indirect medical education payments. All WHG session summaries are available on Policy Hub [here.](#)

Thurs. (3/4)

- **The Senate** adopted a motion to proceed to consideration of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 ([H.R. 1319](#)) by a 51-50 vote, with Vice President Kamala Harris breaking the tie. [Details.](#)
- **MACPAC [convened](#)** virtually for its March 2021 public meeting and held sessions on behavioral health services, the skilled nursing facility value-based purchasing program, high-cost specialty drugs, and COVID-19 vaccine coverage. All WHG session summaries are available on Policy Hub [here.](#)
- **MedPAC [convened](#)** virtually for Day One of its March 2021 public meeting and held sessions on alternative payment modes, Medicare Advantage benchmarks, and clinician services. All WHG session summaries are available on Policy Hub [here.](#)

Tues. (3/2)

- The House E&C Subcommittee on Health [convened](#) a hearing to discuss the future of telehealth reform in light of the recent, pandemic-driven expansions. [Details.](#)

REGULATORY LOOKBACK

Fri. (3/5)

- **The NIH [issued](#)** a request for information (RFI) on how the agency can advance research to eliminate or lessen health disparities and inequities. Submissions are due April 9. [Details.](#)

Thurs. (3/4)

- **The HHS OIG [released](#)** a report that analyzed Medicare Part A claims paid for inpatient hospital stays from FY 2014 through FY 2019 to identify trends in hospital billing and Medicare payments for the highest severity level stays. [Details.](#)

- CMS [reported](#) that more than 206,000 new enrollees signed up for health insurance plans during the first two weeks of the Coronavirus-related Special Enrollment Period (SEP). [Details](#).

Tues. (3/2)

- CMMI [signaled](#) that it has put its Geographic Direct Contracting model on hold for further review by the new Administration. [Details](#).

Mon. (3/1)

- The AHRQ [announced](#) it is seeking scientific information from stakeholders to inform its work on improving rural health through telehealth-guided, provider-to-provider communication. Submissions are due April 1. [Details](#).
- CMS [announced](#) it is making approximately \$2.3 million available to support current Navigator grantees in FFM states to improve enrollment efforts for the recently announced Special Enrollment Period opened in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. [Details](#).

COMMENT & APPLICATION DEADLINES

- **March 10:** CMS requests comment on proposed changes to the Quality Rating System (QRS) and Qualified Health Plan (QHP) Enrollee survey program. [Details](#).
- **March 12:** CDC released a [request for nominations](#) for membership to the Advisory Committee on Breast Cancer in Young Women.
- **March 15:** HRSA announced a maternal and child health-focused Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) – Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems: Health Integration Prenatal-to-Three Program. [Details](#).
- **March 15:** The USPSTF [issued](#) a draft recommendation statement in favor of screening for gestational diabetes mellitus (GDM) in asymptomatic pregnant persons at 24 weeks of gestation or after. [Details](#).
- **March 15:** USPSTF [announced](#) a request for nominations to serve on the task force. Selected members will serve a four-year term. [Details](#).
- **March 26:** The FDA [announced](#) a request for comment seeking input on topic areas for an upcoming disease progression modeling workshop. [Details](#).
- **April 1:** The AHRQ [announced](#) it is seeking scientific information from stakeholders to inform its work on improving rural health through telehealth-guided, provider-to-provider communication. [Details](#).
- **April 9:** The NIH [issued](#) a request for information (RFI) on how the agency can advance research to eliminate or lessen health disparities and inequities. [Details](#).
- **April 19:** HRSA [announced](#) a maternal and child health-focused Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) – Sickle Cell Disease Newborn Screening Follow-up Program. [Details](#).

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