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**Wyden Statement at Finance Committee Hearing on Supercharged Unemployment Benefits
During COVID-19 Health and Economic Crisis**
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There's a lot for us to talk about today, and I want to start with Friday's jobs report. The president celebrated like it was the greatest victory since the end of World War II, but let's put this in perspective.

Speaking conservatively, more than 20 million Americans are still out of work today, and I bet you're not celebrating if you're among the many people who don't know how they're going to pay the rent or put food on the table this month. Watching the president celebrate victory in the middle of this jobs crisis is yet another sign that he doesn't understand what it's like for people born without a real estate portfolio.

First, let's recall exactly how the Senate got here, starting in March. The pandemic hit, the economy went into lockdown and unemployment shot into the stratosphere. So when CARES Act negotiations began, Democrats demanded an expansion to unemployment benefits that would bring more workers into the system and fully replace people's lost wages.

Throughout the negotiations, Secretary Scalia said it couldn't be done because states run UI programs on Bronze-Age technology that can't crunch the numbers for individual workers. We said that doing nothing is unacceptable. When Secretary Scalia failed to offer a plan to get benefits out in a timely manner, Democrats proposed a flat-sum solution: \$600 per week across the board on top of traditional benefits, adding up to full wage replacement for the typical worker.

Now fast forward to today. Here's what our country's still dealing with. The pandemic is still killing thousands of Americans every week. The nearly two million new unemployment claims filed last week triple the highest number of claims made in any week during the Great Recession.

It's a national scandal that African-Americans are not only dying of COVID-19 at much higher rates, they're also suffering vastly more economic pain than virtually anybody else. Black unemployment is disproportionately high. And because Black people have been systematically excluded from opportunity and wealth in America, it's a lot less likely they have the financial resources to weather this storm. For the president to say that the recovery has arrived and everything is turning into sunshine will only perpetuate that economic injustice.

So bottom line, this crisis will go on a lot longer if the Trump administration and Senate Republicans start yanking out these key pillars of economic support like supercharged unemployment benefits. Main

Street businesses nationwide are hanging on by a thread. Workers could lose their homes and fall through the cracks if the Senate does not help them.

Now I want to respond to a few arguments I've heard against supercharged unemployment benefits. First is the idea that Americans who've lost their jobs in the pandemic are going to be perfectly happy to sit around instead of going back to work. In my view, that is an insult to America's workers. It's also a misunderstanding of how the system functions.

Talk to the out-of-work Oregonians I've spoken with during this crisis, and you'll hear from people who want to get back to their jobs. They believe in the dignity of work. They want to earn their pay and support their families and return to the lives they had before. They know that they're more likely to get ahead if they're working and moving up the economic ladder than being on unemployment.

Second, members of this committee said it's somehow unhealthy for people to get unemployment benefits during this crisis. This is just fundamentally out of touch with the realities Americans are facing in this crisis. These benefits are what's saving millions of jobless people from hunger and homelessness in the middle of this pandemic. Forcing people back into contagious workplaces would also further spread the virus that has killed 110,000 Americans and turned nursing homes nationwide into scenes of tragedy.

Third, I've heard talk among Republican Senators of cutting the expanded benefits potentially by half. So let's get this straight. Between the CARES Act and Fed lending programs, big corporations are getting trillions of dollars in support to weather this crisis, but Congress is going to start pinching pennies when the little guy needs help? The system is already rigged to favor the powerful and wealthy. The Congress certainly should not stack the deck any further.

Our unemployment insurance system, created in the 1930s, should have been modernized long ago to cover the self-employed, gig workers and freelancers. Long ago, benefits should have been tied years ago to economic conditions on the ground.

I believe that Congress should also examine whether a federal approach for administering unemployment benefits could do a better job than this quilt of 50 different state systems operating today. Nobody predicted the volume of claims they'd be hit with in this crisis, but whether it's due to neglect or political sabotage, too many of these state systems are failing the people who are in desperate need of help.

I'll close on one final thought. American workers are not to blame for the jobs crisis that this country still faces today. By now everybody here has seen images of cars stacked up for miles at food bank distribution centers around the country. Those are modern-day breadlines. With so many people out of work, America is on the precipice of an eviction tsunami, particularly in the Black community.

Supercharging unemployment benefits – fully replacing people's lost wages and bringing gig workers and freelancers into the system – was the right thing to do. I know that's not just the opinion of the Democrats who got it done, because the president is absurdly taking credit for the expansion in misleading campaign ads on the airwaves right now.

Every Republican member of this committee voted to strip the expanded benefits and slow down their distribution, and at least a few of them turned around and sent out op-eds and press releases touting that same expansion. The Chutzpah Caucus at work.

So the Senate has a choice to make. It's about fairness for the tens of millions out of work. It's about fairness for African-Americans who are disproportionately suffering. It's about fairness for the blue collar worker who looks around and sees a whole lot more support going to corporations than to workers.

The only fair choice to make is to extend supercharged unemployment benefits, and do it now.

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