

CARE from A1

last week, with 76,500 new claims — up from 4,900 the prior week, according to the Oregon Employment Department.

Meanwhile, the nation still faces escalating numbers of Americans testing positive for the COVID-19 virus and dying in large numbers. As of Thursday, the U.S. had the highest number of known cases of coronavirus in the world, surpassing China and Italy with 82,100 cases reported by health officials at the Centers for Disease Control.

The stimulus package is seen as a strong step in what is clearly the most challenging situation the country has faced since 9/11, said Oregon's U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, the ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee and chief negotiator in crafting CARES.

"From the start, Democrats made it clear that struggling families and small businesses must be the priority in any economic package passed by Congress," said Wyden. "I fought hard for a bill that would help those Oregonians who have no way to pay their bills for potentially months down the road, and the small businesses struggling to stay afloat during this crisis. There is lots of work ahead, but tonight the Senate took the right step toward helping alleviate the economic pain so many Oregonians are feeling."

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley (D) has also been deeply involved with contributing to the provisions of the package, while paying particular attention to the needs of the health care

workers that are the front-line responders during the pandemic.

"As the husband of a nurse, I've seen up close how difficult their jobs are and how important they are to patients," Merkley said. "As this pandemic intensifies, nurses will be on the frontlines of the fight against the coronavirus. We needed a major investment in nurses and the nursing workforce even before this crisis hit, and we need it even more now. We must realize that any choice between our lives and our livelihoods is a false choice — we cannot have one without the other. "This proposal invests in both health care and the economy. It provides desperately needed relief so that we can save lives now and keep families afloat until we have defeated this virus. Now, Congress must pass it, and the president must sign it, without delay."

More than 3 million Americans filed for unemployment benefits last week, five times the highest number of single-week applications ever filed.

Important aspects of the CARES legislation include:

- Direct payments to single Americans making less than \$99,000.

- A new federal Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program which will cover workers not covered by traditional unemployment insurance, including self-employed and gig workers.

Workers covered by traditional unemployment insurance and the new pandemic program will receive a 13-week extension of available benefits (39 weeks total) and an additional \$600 per week for four months, which will be full wage

replacement for many workers.

- \$100 billion for hospitals and other providers to deal with overcapacity and other challenges. The bill also secures policies that ensure seniors with Medicare can receive up to 90 days of prescriptions at a time, boost care at home through telemedicine and increased use of non-physician providers and makes the eventual COVID-19 vaccine free for seniors.

- \$400 million for states to expand vote by mail, early voting, and other measures to reduce health risks from voting.

- More than \$10 billion for the Indian Health Services and other tribal programs.

- Establishment of robust worker protections attached to all federal loans for businesses.

- \$30 billion in emergency education funding and \$25 billion in emergency transit funding.

- \$30 billion for the Disaster Relief Fund to provide financial assistance to state, local, tribal and territorial governments, as well as private nonprofits providing critical and essential services.

- Prohibition on busi-

nesses controlled by the president, vice president, members of congress, and heads of executive departments from receiving loans or investments from Treasury programs.

In addition, the bill provides \$450 million for the Emergency Food Assistance Program, a primary support mechanism for food pantries, which are expected to see more clients as job losses mount. Some \$350 million would buy additional food, and \$100 million would be used for distribution.

The package also provides \$200 million for food assistance for Puerto Rico and other US territories, as well as \$100 million for food distribution on American Indian reservations.

In yet another encouraging example of working together, Democratic senators Wyden and Merkley, along with Democratic U.S. representatives Peter DeFazio, Earl Blumenauer, Suzanne Bonamici and Republican Representatives Kurt Schrader and Greg Walden, sent a joint letter Friday to the White House supporting Oregon Gov. Kate Brown's request for a major disaster declaration

for the entire state as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We have heard from rural health clinics, hospitals and providers who are having to lay off employees due to reduced patient care and declining revenues. We have heard from heroic frontline health care workers stressed about the lack of test kits and personal protective equipment," the lawmakers wrote in their letter. "We have heard from small business owners suffering financially and wondering how to put food on the table. We have heard from volunteers in rural fire and ambulance districts who must choose whether to self-quarantine or continue providing critical

ical public safety services to their communities.

"Oregon is a resilient and forward-thinking state and Oregonians are working hard to secure shelter for people who are homeless and medical care for those who need it. But no state will be able to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic alone, which is why we urge you to approve Governor Brown's full request for assistance."

The White House did not respond by press time to a request for comment on either the details of the stimulus package or Brown's request for a Federal Emergency Declaration.

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