

Democratic Illinois officials applaud passage of federal stimulus

'American Rescue Plan' to send \$13.2 billion for state and local governments

By Peter Hancock
Capitol News Illinois

Democratic state officials in Illinois applauded the final passage Wednesday of President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion federal relief package, which includes billions of dollars in aid to cash-strapped state and local governments.

The "American Rescue Plan" passed the U.S. House on Wednesday, 220-211, largely along party lines. No Republicans voted in favor of the bill while only one Democrat voted against it. The White House has indicated that Biden plans to sign the bill Friday.

The bill includes direct payments of up to \$1,400 for most Americans, which people should receive by the end of the month. But it also includes aid for state and local governments that suffered massive revenue losses after much of the U.S. economy was shut down last spring

due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to U.S. Sens. Dick Durbin and Tammy Duckworth, both Democrats, the bill will send \$7.5 billion directly to the state of Illinois. It also provides another \$5.5 billion for city and county governments in the state as well as another \$5 billion for Illinois K-12 schools.

"I am grateful to Senators Durbin, Duckworth, and our congressional delegation for making sure Congress took bold, swift action," Illinois House Speaker Emanuel "Chris" Welch, D-Hillside, said in a statement. "Once guidelines are issued by federal authorities, I look forward to working with the Pritzker administration and our budget leaders on how to best appropriate these funds so they meet the needs of our most vulnerable communities. While I know the road to recovery will not be easy,

this bill gives us the funds necessary to simultaneously address this health and economic crisis."

The current fiscal year's budget, which lawmakers passed in May, was based on the assumption that Congress would pass a relief package for state and local governments and that Illinois voters in November would approve Gov. JB Pritzker's proposed constitutional amendment to allow for a graduated income tax.

But the tax amendment failed at the polls, and congressional Republicans, who held a majority in the U.S. Senate until the 2020 elections, firmly opposed providing fiscal aid to state and local governments. Those factors combined put the state's budget out of balance by roughly \$4.9 billion.

The state has since closed that gap, in part by borrowing \$2 billion from the Federal

Reserve in December and in part because last year's tax filing deadline was pushed back from April 15 to July 15. But the state's economy has also recovered faster than expected and on Tuesday, the Commission on Government Forecasting and Accountability revised its estimate of base revenues upward by nearly \$2.9 billion, enough to close what had been a projected deficit.

"This financial relief is needed in Illinois to pay back billions of dollars we borrowed from the Federal Reserve that allowed us to cover the state's health care bills as we fight our way through this pandemic," Illinois Comptroller Susana Mendoza said in a statement, noting that the state still faces considerable economic challenges due to the pandemic.

"Restaurants and hotels were closed and not paying sales taxes," she added. "Em-

ployees were laid off. Not only were they not earning a paycheck and not paying personal income taxes to the state, people who'd never sought unemployment benefits had to file for the first time and avail themselves of other state services. The state had less money coming in and more demand for services. It was a double whammy to the people and to the state budget, and it will take years to recover."

Illinois Senate President Don Harmon, D-Oak Park, also praised passage of the legislation.

"The funds Illinois is receiving will help us distribute vaccines, support local health departments, safely reopen schools and provide direct relief to the hardest hit families," he said in a statement. "This package gets us one step closer to ending the pandemic and addressing the economic pain it caused."

Republicans in Illinois' congressional delegation, however, remained critical of the package. U.S. Rep. Mike Bost, of Murphysboro, issued a statement saying Democrats should have worked harder to find bipartisan consensus.

"Up to this point, every piece of COVID-19 relief legislation that has been signed into law has been bipartisan, and I have supported all five," he said. "But this time around, (U.S. House Speaker) Nancy Pelosi pushed forward on her own bill without any input from congressional Republicans."

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allowing companies to receive "consent" for biometric data use instead of the "written release" required in the original bill, and it allows for the consent to be given through "electronic means."

It would also change the penalty structure for damages. For negligence violations, it would remove the \$1,000

liquidated damages penalty, limiting claimants in that category to reimbursement of "actual damages," which are quantifiable repercussions of the violation of the law.

For "intentional or reckless" violations, the language would be changed to "willful" violations, and the \$5,000 number for liquidated damages would be removed. Instead, claimants would be entitled to "actual damages plus liquidated damages up

to the amount of actual damages."

Advocates for the reform also argued that BIPA has innovation killing aspects, taking competitiveness away from Illinois businesses which worry about implementing new technology out of fear of BIPA's liability.

Opponents are more concerned that the bill will render the existing law useless.

Sapna Khatri, advocacy and policy counsel for the

ACLU of Illinois, noted that BIPA has been called the most effective and important privacy law in the country because of its simplicity.

"We are here because BIPA is working precisely as it was intended," Khatri said. "This (new bill) is prioritizing corporate profits over personal privacy and granting companies wide latitude to collect and exchange our biometric information like currency. This is not a solu-

tion."

Opponents to HB 559, such as Rep. Ann Williams, D-Chicago, and Rep. Jennifer Gong-Gershowitz, D-Glenview, argued that as technology advances, BIPA as it stands is imperative to protecting Illinois residents' most personal private data.

"At a time when our neighbors and other states are modeling legislation around BIPA and issuing bans on the use of invasive biometric

technology, like facial recognition, HB 559 presents a massive step back for Illinois," Khatri said.

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State Fire Marshal reminds Illinoisans to change batteries and test alarms

Daylight saving time a reminder to check smoke alarms and review fire-safety plans

The Office of the State Fire Marshal (OSFM) reminds Illinoisans to test, check for expired alarms and replace batteries in their smoke alarms as they changed the clock last weekend.

"Working smoke alarms are critical to preventing serious injuries and death in the case of a house fire. It only takes a couple of extra minutes to push the test button on smoke alarm or CO alarm to ensure it's working. That extra minute or two could

save your life one day," said State Fire Marshall Matt Perez. "In 2020, the pandemic slowed the efforts of our "Be Alarmed" program. Still, we had 185 participating fire departments from 61 counties in Illinois install 1655 10-year sealed smoke alarms in Illinois homes. Thanks to their dedication, there are nearly 600 homes in Illinois protected and nearly 1400 residents educated on smoke alarm maintenance, home fire safety and home fire escape plans. Replacing broken or

expired alarms not only helps to create a fire-safe home, but working alarms provide early warning helping prevent loss of life due to fire"

The time change serves as a bi-annual reminder to test all smoke and CO alarms in your home. If you find an alarm that is not working or is expired, replace the alarm immediately with a new 10-year sealed battery alarm. Review your fire-escape plan with your family and hold a drill to practice your plan.

The National Fire Pro-

tection Association (NFPA) reports between 2012-2016, almost three out of every five home fire deaths in the U.S. resulted from fires in homes with no smoke alarms or non-working smoke alarms. The chances of dying in a home fire was reduced by 54% in homes where working smoke alarms are present. In fires in which the smoke alarms were present but did not operate, more than two of every five of the smoke alarms had missing or disconnected batteries. Dead batteries accounted for

25% of smoke alarm failures. In 2020 in Illinois, 80% of pre-existing smoke alarms being replaced in homes that received the new 10-year sealed battery alarms through the "Be Alarmed!" program was found to be non-functional or were expired.

A 2017 Illinois law requires ten-year sealed smoke alarms be installed in all homes built before 1988 or that do not have hardwired smoke detectors by January 1, 2023.

"Be Alarmed!" is a fire

safety education and smoke alarm installation program administered cooperatively between the Illinois Fire Safety Alliance (IFSA) and the Office of the Illinois State Fire Marshal (OSFM). "The "Be Alarmed!" program is designed to help residents in Illinois comply with the new law, but it's really aimed at creating fire-safe communities.

For more information on the "Be Alarmed!" program visit <https://www.ifsa.org/programs/alarms>.

Emergency Management Agency highlights flood safety awareness

Nearly every day, flooding happens somewhere in the United States. Flooding can cause more damage in the United States than any other weather-related event and is also one of America's most underrated killers, causing nearly 90 fatalities per year. As part of Severe Weather Preparedness Month, the Il-

linois Emergency Management Agency (IEMA) and local emergency management officials are reminding residents that good preparation and knowing what to do in a flood can increase chances of survival when flooding occurs in your area.

"More than 2.1 million Illinoisans are all too familiar

with the devastating effects of flooding, and some communities are still rebuilding following the historic 2019 flood," said IEMA Director Alicia Tate-Nadeau. "Flood Safety Awareness Week serves as a timely reminder for Illinois residents to prepare for potential spring flooding. Be aware of the

flood risks in your community and know the steps to take to keep your family safe in the event of an emergency."

Flood preparedness tips include:

- Stay informed: Learn things you can do now to stay safe from flooding due to large storms. It's important to stay informed about what is happening with the storm as it approaches and always follow the instructions of local emergency management officials. NOAA Weather Alert Radios provide critical information in a timely manner on storms, hazards and emergencies.
- Take photos: If you have contents coverage on your flood insurance policy and you haven't already done so, take photos of clothing, flooring, light fixtures, appliances, furniture, etc.-- anything that could be damaged by the flood. Having this can help if you need to file a flood insurance claim later. If you're not sure what your flood insurance policy covers, call your insurance agent.
- Reduce flooding risks:
 - o Make sure your sump pump is working. Then, install a battery-operated backup in case of power failure.
 - o Install a water alarm that will let you know if water is accumulating in your basement.

o Clear debris from gutters and downspouts.

o Raise and anchor service equipment and appliances (air conditioning units, water heaters, heat pumps, water meters) onto platforms so they are at least one foot above potential flood waters.

• Protect valuable documents: Store copies of irreplaceable documents (such as birth certificates, passports, insurance documents, deeds, etc.) in a safe, dry place. It can also be a good idea to photograph these documents and store the images in a safe place, too.

• Prepare your family: Develop a family emergency plan and review it with all family members. Visit Ready.Illinois.gov for step by step instructions on how to prepare for, survive and rebuild after any storm or emergency.

• Be ready to evacuate: Plan and practice a flood evacuation route. Ask someone out of state to be your "family contact" in an emergency, and make sure everyone knows the contact's address and phone number.

• Plan for pets and animals: Make a pet and animal plan. Many shelters do not allow pets. Make plans now on what to do with your pets if you are required to evacuate your residence.

• Check your insurance

coverage: A flood insurance policy could protect you from the devastating expenses caused by flooding. Standard homeowners' insurance does not cover flood damage. A flood policy takes 30 days to go into effect from application to payment, so taking action before a storm is recommended. The National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) protects policyholders financially even if they live in an area that did not qualify for federal disaster assistance. In fact, statistics show, insured survivors are able to recover quicker and more fully from a flood or other catastrophic event than their uninsured neighbors.

Another important safety tips during a flood is, "Turn Around, Don't Drown," which is intended to remind people to never drive on a flooded road. Most flood-related fatalities involve people in vehicles attempting to drive through a road covered with water. The speed and depth of the water is not always obvious, and as little as two feet of rushing water can sweep away most vehicles, including trucks and SUVs.

For more information about flood preparedness, visit the Ready Illinois website at www.Ready.Illinois.gov.



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