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**Wyden Kicks Off COVID Budget Resolution Debate**  
*As Prepared for Delivery*

Mr. President, this afternoon the Senate begins debate on the budget resolution. As this debate goes on, it's going to include a lot of votes on amendments, a lot of Washington lingo and a lot of big numbers. So I want to start out by addressing the basics of what this debate is all about.

This entire debate comes down to whether millions of workers and their families should have to spend years and years living in the wreckage of the COVID economy.

The jobs recovery for millions is going in reverse. Millions of Americans have lost jobs through no fault of their own. They might have been working at the airport, or tending bar, or teaching our kids when the worst pandemic in a century swept through the United States. They did nothing wrong. So the question is whether the United States Senate is going to step up with big policies to help them, or whether it will quit on those workers when they need a modest amount of help until everybody gets vaccinated.

President Biden has a strong, focused plan that will meet the moment, get relief to workers and the middle class, and kick-start the jobs recovery. Ten Republican Senators brought forward a plan that will not meet that bar. This debate is really not much more complicated than that. I'm glad there's agreement on both sides on funding for vaccines and some other areas. But the economic divide in this debate is clear.

So as the Senate begins this debate, here are the facts. The independent experts at the Congressional Budget Office released a new report yesterday that shows just how serious and how long lasting the jobs crisis really is.

According to CBO, it could be more than five years before the unemployment rate even begins to approach where it was a year ago. Millions of workers and their families could spend those years stuck on an economic tightrope, worried about eviction, worried about going hungry. Wages could flat line for the better part of the decade, too.

The American people know what happens when the Congress takes its foot off the gas and slows down an economic recovery, because that's exactly what happened 12 years ago.

The Great Recession hit, but in early 2009 the Senate decided not to go big. I was around. Many of my colleagues were around. We were told that it was okay to go with a smaller bill because the Senate would get a second bite at the apple.

Well, we never got that second bite. Workers suffered because of it. In my home state of Oregon, it took seven and a half years for the unemployment rate to fall back to where it was before the recession.

Recent history tells us to go big. The economic experts are also telling us to go big. Treasury Secretary Yellen – fresh off her unanimous approval by the Finance Committee – as well as Fed Chair Powell, have told us that going small would be a big mistake.

That's why the outline that a group of my Republican colleagues brought forward this week simply fails to get the job done. It's the same playbook as 2009, and it would leave too many workers on that economic tightrope for years to come.

The budget resolution before the Senate this week has the big solutions our economy and our workers need. Right off the top, it makes the investments in vaccines and other care needed to end the pandemic as quickly as possible. That is the number one way to get everybody's lives back to normal. But that's not going to happen overnight, so in the meantime, the economy needs another rescue package. That's what this budget resolution sets up.

Now I want to take just a few minutes to give three examples of what this resolution does and why it's so important.

First, it sends big financial support to jobless Americans. Let's understand that there isn't going to be a full jobs recovery as long as it's unsafe to dine indoors or go to conventions or pack fans into basketball arenas. So those workers need help.

I negotiated the \$600 per week boost and expansion of unemployment insurance last year in the CARES Act. It was an economic lifesaver. Contrary to what Republicans have said, there's never been any real evidence that enhanced unemployment benefits held back the recovery. In fact, when enhanced UI expired last summer, the jobs recovery slowed down.

In December, Republicans extended UI only into mid-March, and they cut the additional benefit in half, to \$300. I believe that was a big mistake.

Between the worst economy since World War II and the pandemic entering its second year in America, you could not find a worse time for senators to start nickel-and-diming hard-hit workers out of the relief they desperately need. And the fact is, my Republican colleagues have opposed the enhanced UI benefit from the beginning.

In Portland, Oregon, the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment is \$1,750. Traditional UI benefits don't come anywhere close to paying the rent. If you're a single parent trying to raise one or two kids, even with the enhanced benefit, you're barely making ends meet.

Even if you're a two-income household, it can be a struggle. Nobody is going out and buying a boat with their UI benefits. They're spending it locally. At local restaurants, local corner stores, local markets. It's just about helping people get by, and it's good for their communities.

The budget resolution before the Senate calls for a six-month extension with an extra boost of \$400 per week. It's a good proposal that I fully support. In later packages, I'm going to keep pushing for the full \$600, and I believe the Congress ought to tie the extension of unemployment benefits to economic conditions on the ground. It's just common sense. UI works best when it covers all workers, when it pays an adequate benefit, and when political battles in Congress don't get in the way.

Second, the budget resolution helps to bring back jobs. The RESTAURANTS Act is a vital jobs program. It'll save a lot of jobs in one of the industries hit hardest by the pandemic crash – and it's particularly important because a lot of restaurants weren't able to take advantage of the PPP program.

Another key jobs proposal in this resolution is state and local funding. And I want to make something perfectly clear about state and local funding, because Republicans have been attacking this since last March. I'd bet my last dollar that somebody will come down to the Senate floor this week and rail against the so-called "blue state bailout" and say it's a big waste. It's all nonsense.

State and local funding is first and foremost about jobs – period, end of story. It's about teachers, it's about firefighters, it's about road crews and sanitation workers and public health employees. It's got nothing to do with red states or blue states. It's about saving people's jobs in communities across the country, because the pandemic has hit state and local budgets like a wrecking ball.

Nearly one and a half million of these essential workers have already lost their jobs since the pandemic began and unless Congress provides funding to states and localities even more will be laid off this year.

Third, the budget resolution will help put dollars into the pockets of working families and the middle class. The fact is, tens of millions of American families are just one big setback away from financial devastation. That should have been clear to everybody before the pandemic, but there's no denying it today.

Increasing relief checks to \$2,000 total will help, especially because so many workers have lost hours or taken lower-paying jobs than they had a year ago. But the budget resolution also includes fresh ideas from President Biden to increase family incomes, first and foremost expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit. In my view, this is long overdue. It would cut child poverty in half, and it would give millions and millions of families an opportunity to get ahead. To me, that's a no brainer.

Now I want to close by addressing some arguments I've already heard coming from the other side in this debate.

First, I've heard members say that the price tag is too high. Here's my view – if you voted for Donald Trump's deficit-financed handouts to corporations and billionaires, you cannot credibly argue that relief for workers is fiscally reckless. And the fact is, the deficit is never going to get better unless unemployment comes down and the economy gets back to strong, consistent growth.

Second, I've heard some members suggest that this budget resolution is bad for unity. Colleagues, the only place where big, bold economic relief is a divisive proposition is within the four walls of the United States Senate. I've always tried to bring the two sides together. But calls for unity aren't supposed to be a political cudgel – they ought to be genuine. What you see in this budget resolution is exactly the kind of plan that the American people voted for and that overwhelming majorities of Americans support.

That's why I'm 100 percent behind this resolution. I'm looking forward to a lot of debate over the days ahead. Bottom line, the Senate has got to get this done. There's yet another unemployment cliff coming in just a few weeks. There is no time to waste, so I urge my colleagues to support the resolution too. I yield the floor.

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