

 **Pelosi, Schumer blast \$916B White House coronavirus relief proposal**

Rebecca Shabad & Garrett Haake

WASHINGTON — House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Chuck Schumer late Tuesday rejected a Trump-backed \$916 billion coronavirus relief proposal that was offered by Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin.



Provided by NBC News

*House GOP Leader Kevin McCarthy said the plan proposes a **\$600 direct payment for individuals and \$1,200 for couples**, which is half the payment delivered by the March pandemic relief bill, the Associated Press reported.*

In a joint statement, Schumer and Pelosi described it as progress that Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., endorsed the cost of the package, but they signaled that the proposal was obstructing bipartisan negotiations already underway among lawmakers. The Democratic leaders also made clear that the reduction in unemployment benefits from what's on the table is something they could never support.

"The President's proposal starts by cutting the unemployment insurance proposal being discussed by bipartisan Members of the House and Senate from \$180 billion to \$40 billion. That is unacceptable," they said.

Mnuchin said he had spoken to Pelosi on behalf of President Donald Trump and presented the plan, which he said is larger than the \$908 bipartisan proposal.

"This proposal includes money for state and local governments and robust liability protections for businesses, schools and universities," Mnuchin said. "

As part of this proposal, we will fund it using \$140 Billion in unused funds from the Paycheck Protection program and \$429 Billion in Treasury funds."

The White House proposal came as McConnell suggested to lawmakers negotiating the bipartisan plan that they set aside the two most contentious parts of their talks — aid to state and local governments and a liability shield for employers. Schumer and Pelosi, however, rejected that approach.

Meanwhile, a group of progressive Democratic Senators led by Bernie Sanders demanded that another round of \$1,200 checks be added to the plan, with the overall price tag being \$300 billion.

Senator Josh Hawley, R-Mo., said Tuesday that he spoke to Trump over the weekend about adding stimulus checks to the package.

The bipartisan framework does not include direct stimulus payments.

The latest developments come as Congress is expected to take up a government spending measure that will extend the funding deadline by one week, to Dec. 18, to buy more time for these bipartisan negotiations.

New White House offer adds \$600 checks to COVID-19 relief

Andrew Taylor - AP News



Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky talks during a news conference Tuesday, Dec. 8, 2020, on Capitol Hill in Washington/Greg Nash/Pool via AP)

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration dove back into Capitol Hill's confusing COVID-19 negotiations on Tuesday, offering a \$916 billion package to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi that would send a \$600 direct payment to most Americans — but eliminate a \$300 per week employment benefit favored by a bipartisan group of Senate negotiators.

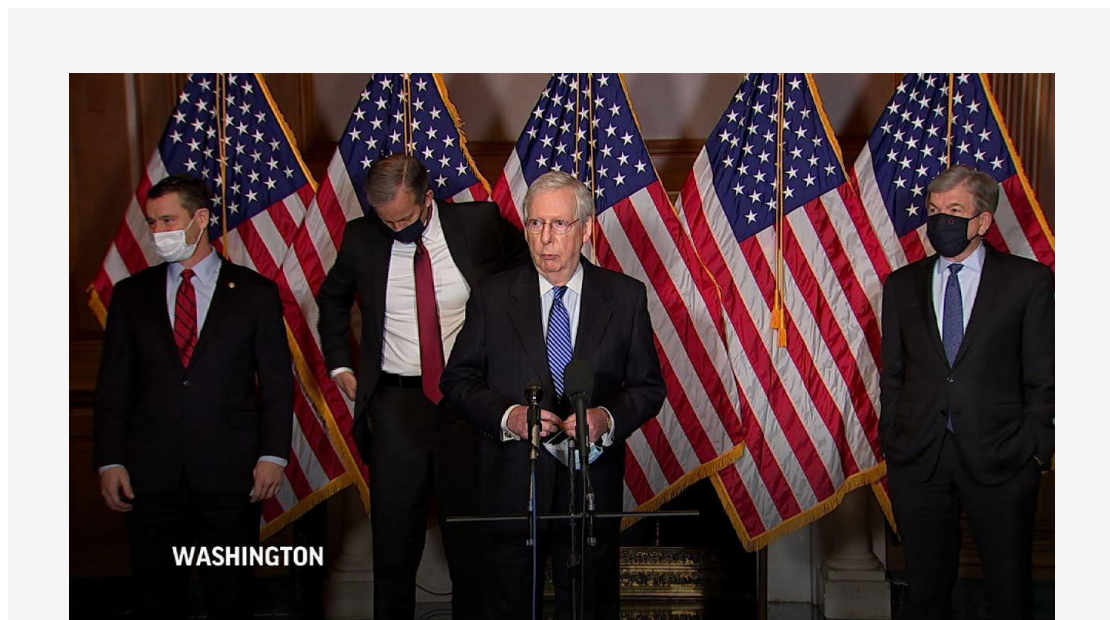
Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin made the offer to Pelosi late Tuesday afternoon, he said in a statement. He offered few details, though House GOP Leader Kevin McCarthy said it proposes the \$600 direct payment for individuals and \$1,200 for couples, which is half the payment delivered by the March pandemic relief bill.

Mnuchin reached out to Pelosi after a call with top congressional GOP leaders, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who remains at odds with Democratic leaders over COVID-19 relief.

Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., responded to Mnuchin's entreaty with a statement that said they would prefer to let a bipartisan group take the lead.

The bipartisan group, led by Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and GOP Sens. Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, among others, is seeking to rally lawmakers in both parties behind a \$908 billion framework that includes a \$300-per-week pandemic jobless benefit and \$160 billion for states and local governments.

It is more generous than a GOP plan that's been filibustered twice already but far smaller than a wish list assembled by House Democrats.



McConnell had earlier proposed shelving a top Democratic priority — aid to state and local governments — in exchange for dropping his own pet provision, a shield against lawsuits for COVID-related negligence. Democrats angrily rejected the idea, saying McConnell was undermining the efforts of a bipartisan group of Senate

negotiators and reneging on earlier statements that state and local aid would likely have to be an element of a COVID-19 relief agreement given Democratic control of the House.

The \$916 billion Mnuchin offer, the separate ongoing talks among key rank-and-file senators, and the shifting demands by the White House all add up to muddled, confusing prospects for a long-delayed COVID-19 aid package. The pressure to deliver is intense — all sides say failure isn't an option.

The Mnuchin plan resurrects direct payments that are popular with Trump and the public but which are disliked by many Republican lawmakers who say they are costly and send too much aid to people who do not need it. Democrats generally embrace the idea.

“Right now we're targeting struggling families, failing businesses, health care workers and we don't have a stimulus check to every single person, regardless of need,” said Collins.

McConnell said Congress will not adjourn without providing the long-overdue COVID-19 relief. He had previously said he would not put any pandemic relief bill on the floor that does not include the liability shield, which is being sought by businesses, universities, nonprofits, and others that are reopening during the pandemic.

“Leaving here without a COVID relief package cannot happen,” McConnell said.

“Why don't we set aside the two obviously most contentious issues. We know we're going to be confronted with another request after the first of the year. We'll live to fight those another day.”

Top Senate Democrat Schumer immediately rejected the entreaty, saying the state and local relief is sought by many Republicans, too, including some conservatives like Bill Cassidy of Louisiana and Mitt Romney of Utah.

Pelosi blasted McConnell's offer as an attempt to undercut the bipartisan group whose framework she supports as a foundation for the negotiations.

Pelosi initially demanded more than \$900 billion for state and local governments this spring, but the fiscal situation in the states hasn't been as bad as feared and Democratic leaders could be willing to accept a \$160 billion proposal by the moderate group.

Already, Capitol Hill leaders are moving a government shutdown deadline to the end of next week, but progress is slow and key decisions are yet to be made. The House has scheduled a vote on a one-week temporary government funding bill for Wednesday. Without the measure, the government would shut down this weekend.

Separately, Pelosi and Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Richard Shelby, R-Ala., spoke by phone on Monday to try to kick start talks on a separate \$1.4 trillion government-wide spending bill.

That measure is held up over issues like protections for the sage grouse, the Census and accounting maneuvers being employed by lawmakers to squeeze \$12 billion more into the legislation.

McConnell initially proposed a sweeping five-year liability shield, retroactive to December 2019, to protect companies and organizations from COVID-19-related lawsuits.

Democrats, along with their allies in labor and civil rights groups, roundly dismissed that approach as a danger to workers. And there hasn't been a wave of lawsuits.

flood of COVID lawsuits. In fact, quite the opposite," said Schumer, D-N.Y. "Far from the pandemic of lawsuits, there's barely been a trickle."

Sanders, Warren and other Democrats demand \$1,200 payments in new Covid deal

Sahil Kapur & Julie Tsirkin



Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., at the Capitol on June 17, 2020. Tom Williams / CQ-Roll Call Pool file

WASHINGTON — Six senators led by Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., wrote a letter Tuesday demanding another round of \$1,200 direct payments in a [coronavirus relief package](#) that a bipartisan group of lawmakers is trying to hammer out by next week.

"Please join us in demanding that any new COVID-relief proposal includes a \$1,200 direct payment to adults and \$500 to their children," read the [letter](#), which was co-signed by Democrats Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey of Massachusetts, Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley of Oregon, and Kirsten Gillibrand of New York.

"We very much appreciate the hard work that has gone into the current \$908 billion proposal being drafted by a number of Democratic and Republican Senators. But, simply stated, given the horrific extent of the current crisis and the desperation that working families all over this country are experiencing, this proposal does not go anywhere near far enough," they said.

The letter seeks to inject new pressure into bipartisan negotiations over the \$908 billion coronavirus relief package that includes \$300-per-week unemployment insurance and assistance to small businesses and states, among other provisions.

The current agreement would not include another round of direct payments, a popular provision in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act in March. Republican leaders have objected to the high cost — about \$300 billion — and so negotiators have sought to keep the overall price tag under \$1 trillion.

Among the signatories, Sanders has vowed to vote "no" unless the package includes direct payments, although his colleagues haven't gone that far.

It is unclear if Sanders and the other Democrats could sink a deal without another round of checks by withholding their support.

Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., who supports direct payments and spoke to President Donald Trump about it, said he hasn't "had any luck" finding Republicans who will vocally join him in pushing for another round of checks.

"The person who I've found most receptive to engage with this is the president. I talked to him Saturday night. We had a long conversation about it," he added.

Majority Whip John Thune, R-S.D., told reporters in the Capitol on Tuesday that stimulus checks aren't a "part of the discussion at this point," but "if something else falls out, this could fall in."

Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, part of the coalition crafting the bipartisan relief framework, said "that's not something that's part of our proposal."

"It's not in this framework, the \$908 billion framework. I know there's considerable public support for it but right now we're targeting struggling families, failing businesses, health care workers and we don't have a stimulus check to every single person, regardless of need," Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, said.

Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., said he's open to adding direct payments if his colleagues accept the cost.

Another point of contention in the talks is liability protections for businesses and organizations, a policy sought by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., and resisted by the Democrats who signed the letter.

"Further, please work with us to make certain that there is no language in this bill to give a liability shield to corporations who threaten the health and safety of workers and customers," the six senators wrote.

At his weekly press conference Tuesday, McConnell mentioned numerous policies that are part of the negotiations. He did not mention direct payments.

The Kentucky Republican defended the liability shield Tuesday as necessary to help the economy recover and ward off an epidemic of lawsuits. He said it's "not total immunity" and won't protect employers that are "grossly negligent."

McConnell signaled an endgame on Covid-19 relief if a deal isn't struck soon. He said "the two most contentious items" can be set aside, referring to the liability shield and state and local aid, and be revisited early next year.

"Leaving here without a Covid relief package cannot happen. We have to get that done," he said. "I think both sides fully understand that."

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