August 5, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Leader McConnell,

I am writing with an urgent request to support the millions of American families facing imminent risk of having their basic human needs swept out from underneath their feet. While our country continues to battle the dual COVID-19 health and economic crises, low income families are suffering the most among us with higher rates of COVID infections, inability to safely quarantine, working low wage essential jobs or battling unemployment lines, and at highest risk of eviction or foreclosure. As you negotiate a fourth supplemental appropriations package, beyond the healthcare needs and rental assistance required, I urge you to include at least $2.5 billion in funding for the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) and other civil legal aid programs to alleviate mounting legal issues inhibiting the safe recovery of low income families.

An analysis released by LSC yesterday acknowledges the extreme severity of the issues low income families are facing in just the area of housing. Using available data and assuming the most conservative approximations, LSC estimates there are about 5.1 million households in the LSC income eligibility criteria (125 percent of the Federal Poverty Level) at risk of eviction. Based on data gathered from their grantees, the average eviction case costs about $500 to provide counsel. Using these estimates, the total funding needed to meet the civil legal needs in just housing and eviction cases would be over $2.5 billion.

Of course, the civil legal needs of low income families both before COVID-19 came to our shores and as a result of the pandemic do not simply effect housing issues. They also impact basic human needs like unemployment benefits and other employment related issues, domestic violence and protective order proceedings, consumer debt including student loans and mortgage forbearance, and without question access to healthcare.

While Congress has provided funding in prior COVID supplemental packages to address core issues like rental assistance, unemployment, and healthcare, a mere $50 million has been supplied to help families address underlying legal consequences that come with these core issues. To be clear, Congress must also extend the federal eviction moratorium, but a temporary stopgap will not solve the underlying crisis that will rear its ugly head once again. A family may receive temporary funds to help pay past due rent, but once an eviction notice is on their record it becomes nearly impossible for that family to find safe housing again. A family struggling to put food on the table may see limited additional benefits through a one-time stimulus check and
enhanced unemployment benefits, but crippling credit card debt used to pay for all other expenses will slash their credit score and prevent their ability to afford essential items in the future. In many cases, only with the help of legal counsel can these challenges be fully resolved.

Legal aid organizations, including LSC grantees, do remarkable work with limited resources. In the wake of natural disasters, they are among the first to arrive once immediate danger has passed to help communities recover. As the opioid crisis ravaged our country, legal aid organizations sought solutions to help clients receive needed medical care and ensure legal documents were in order to help families stay together and recover together.

Any additional spending package from Congress must take into account support for legal aid and LSC. Without the assistance of counsel, low income families will continue to suffer long after the immediate health threat from COVID-19 ends. An additional $2.5 billion will go a long way to helping all Americans in this recovery.

Sincerely,

Joseph P. Kennedy, III
Member of Congress