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CORONAVIRUS 04/29/2020 06:52 pm ET | Updated 5 days ago

Tribes Were Supposed To Get \$8 Billion In COVID-19 Aid. They've Gotten \$0.

The delay in disbursing the money "is unnecessary and works against the federal government's trust responsibility," House Democrats told Treasury.



By Jennifer Bendery

"Navajo Nation joins lawsuit against U.S." will play after the ad 00:22



in direct emergency relief from the that became law on March 27.

more than a month later, they haven't gotten any of it.



money, [has been trailing](#) in its dealings with tribes.

Another reason stems from a lawsuit over whether Alaska Native Corporations are entitled to the money. [A federal court on Monday](#) agreed to stop funds from going to those corporations for now, which means Treasury has no reason to not funnel money immediately to the 574 federally recognized tribal governments struggling with the public health and economic fallout from the [coronavirus pandemic](#).



BILL CLARK VIA GETTY IMAGES

Rep. Deb Haaland (D-N.M.), one of two historic Native American women in Congress, is urging the Treasury Department to hurry up and get emergency COVID-19 relief to tribes.

In a Wednesday letter, House Democrats pressed Treasury Secretary [Steven Mnuchin](#) and Interior Secretary [David Bernhardt](#) to distribute the money now because lives are at stake.

“As you are aware, the detrimental impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have had a disproportionate health care and economic impact on federally recognized tribes due a chronic lack of essential resources,” reads the letter signed by Democratic lawmakers including Deb Haaland of New Mexico, co-chair of the Congressional Native American Caucus; Ruben Gallego of Arizona, chair of the House Natural Resources Subcommittee



Resources Committee, and Assistant House Speaker Ben Ray Lujan of New Mexico.

“We respectfully request the Treasury Department immediately begin to disburse the \$8 billion of Coronavirus Relief Funds to eligible federally recognized tribal governments ... in recognition of the negative impact that every day of delay has on Tribes.”

Here’s a copy of their letter:



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

April 29, 2020

The Honorable Steven Mnuchin
Secretary of the Treasury
Department of the Treasury
1500 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20220

The Honorable David Bernhardt
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Re: Immediate Disbursement of Coronavirus Relief Fund to Tribal Governments

Dear Secretary Mnuchin and Secretary Bernhardt:

We write to you today in response to the numerous concerns that we have heard from leaders of the 574 federally-recognized tribal governments regarding the Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF) established under Title V of the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act* following the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia’s Order that was issued on April 27, 2020 enjoining the Treasury Department from disbursing CRF funding to Alaska Native Corporations (ANCs).

Congress designated \$8 billion from the CRF established in the CARES Act to ensure sovereign tribal governments have the resources needed during the COVID-19 pandemic to cover expenditures associated with the public health emergency. As you are aware, the detrimental impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have had a disproportionate health care and economic impact on federally recognized tribes due a chronic lack of essential resources.

The Congressional intent behind the CRF is to expedite relief funds to governments, including sovereign tribal governments, as part of the federal government’s larger initiative to provide emergency assistance throughout the country. As you are aware, the CARES Act was passed over a month ago, on March 27, 2020, yet this funding has yet to be disbursed to tribal governments, in part due to litigation aimed at ensuring these resources go to the governmental entities that Congress intended. While the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia issued its decision yesterday to place a temporary injunction from releasing funds to ANCs until a final decision is rendered, the Court’s decision does not prevent the Treasury Department from releasing resources to federally-recognized Tribal and Alaska Native governments.

Thus, we respectfully request the Treasury Department immediately begin to disburse the \$8 billion of Coronavirus Relief Funds to eligible federally recognized tribal governments in compliance with the intended purpose of the COVID-19 relief funds and in recognition of the negative impact that every day of delay has on Tribes. Further postponement in disbursing these funds is unnecessary and



works against the federal government's trust responsibility to the 574 federally recognized tribal nations in the United States.

Sincerely,

Deb Haaland
Member of Congress

Ruben Gallego
Member of Congress

A request for comment from the Treasury Department was not returned on why it's taken so long to get this money to tribes and when it expects to distribute it.

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Tribal communities are among the most vulnerable to a rapid and devastating spread of the coronavirus. They face some of the highest rates of health conditions like diabetes, heart disease and asthma, all of which leave them more susceptible to the virus. They are often in remote parts of the country, where it's tough to quickly disseminate resources and where families live in small homes shared with elderly family members who are particularly at risk. And the Indian Health Service, which provides health care to nearly 3 million Native Americans, is already notoriously and chronically underfunded.

Put those pieces together and add to the situation that tribal governments still haven't gotten their fair share of federal relief, and it's not hard to imagine how quickly this could become a disaster.

"It is a perfect storm," Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.) [told HuffPost](#) in a recent interview.



cases among federally recognized national tribes. Navajo Nation, for one, has reported more coronavirus cases per capita than all but two states.

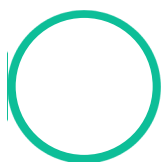
Udall, vice chair of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, said Wednesday that he plans to request oversight hearings on the way the federal government has distributed resources — or not — to tribes. He and other ranking Democrats on Senate committees wrote to Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) urging him to focus on taking action on the coronavirus when the Senate comes back in session on May 4.

“There is currently no scheduled legislative or committee business related to the COVID-19 public health and economic emergencies,” reads their Wednesday letter. “We respectfully urge you to have the Senate focus on COVID-19 related matters and oversight of all COVID-related legislation enacted by Congress.”

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01:16

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Jennifer Bendery Senior Politics Reporter, HuffPost

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