



COVID-19 Special Session Policy Proposal

As elected leaders, it is our duty to look out for and protect the people of Arizona. This is especially critical as we navigate the COVID-19 pandemic that is only getting worse. Arizonans continue to be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and Legislative Democrats have stepped up to help working families and small businesses who are struggling and will light the path for our state to emerge stronger for all Arizonans.

Stronger Arizona

Under failed majority leadership, Arizona families have been struggling for decades. Now, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed severe cracks in Arizona's foundation and shortcomings in the ability to address statewide emergencies, especially in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. Legislative Democrats are working for all Arizonans, communities, and small businesses and have developed a comprehensive COVID-19 response for an anticipated special session. To start, we must streamline Arizona's overly complicated and ineffective unemployment insurance program, fix the inaccessible housing assistance programs, expand access to childcare subsidies and food programs, help those still trying to stay afloat after the statewide shutdown, protect the right to vote safely, and pass common-sense criminal justice reforms to a prison system that has exacerbated the spread and death toll of COVID-19. It's time to reimagine a new Arizona with a strong foundation that works for *everyone* in our state. This is how we start:

Unemployment Insurance: Unemployment in America is the highest since the Great Depression. Now more than ever, we must increase unemployment insurance benefits, lower the threshold to qualify, and fix structural issues (including chronic underfunding and outdated IT systems).

Housing: It's crucial that people stay home during this pandemic. To ensure this, we must provide more funding for rent and mortgages, and extend the eviction moratorium for renters.

Prisons, Jails, and Justice System: Jails and prisons throughout the state continue to be hotspots for COVID-19, putting the prison population, corrections staff, and surrounding communities at risk of an outbreak. One of the most effective ways we can mitigate the spread is by reducing the prison population. We propose expanding compassionate and earned early-release options and increased oversight of the DOC work with county attorneys and courts to develop policies that encourage the release of non-violent offenders who are at high risk of contracting COVID-19.

Fair and Secure Elections: It is unconscionable to force voters to choose between their personal safety and exercising their right to vote. In the local primaries of Wisconsin, 52 people contracted COVID-19 at the polls, while we saw disproportionately long lines at polling sites located in black and brown communities in Georgia. Arizona has led with one of the safest and most effective ballot-by-mail systems in the nation. By mailing a ballot to every registered voter, we would protect each Arizonan's right to vote, while working with tribal and rural communities to provide alternative options as well. Additionally, we should allow early vote centers to stay open longer hours and on weekends, including immediately before election. We need to guarantee that the Secretary of State and County Election Officials have the resources to ensure voters are safe when they go to vote this election. The legislature must appropriate funds in order to draw down federal CARES Act monies to achieve this.

Child Care Subsidies: While many Arizonans perform essential work during this pandemic, their children need a safe and healthy environment to stay. To support these hardworking Arizonans, we must appropriate the \$88 million in federal childcare funds Arizona received under the CARES Act. This funding will require the legislature to provide expenditure authority before it can be used.

Feeding Families: Arizona families now more than ever need a helping hand. It's imperative that federal money under the CARES Act be used to provide "child only" cash assistance or TANF to the informal kinship families who currently receive no financial support even though they prevent children from going into DCS custody. With child abuse hotline calls so dramatically down, we are expecting a wave of DCS cases once children are back in school and child care.

Strong Schools

All of Arizona's children should have access to a quality education and sustainably funded schools. Their environments should be safe, and they should be taught by certified teachers and have access to the resources they need to succeed. During the pandemic when schools have been closed, children have had unequal access to instruction depending on their socioeconomic status, access to technology, and parental involvement. The achievement gap between the high and low-achieving students has likely widened during remote learning, and many special education students have had a difficult time engaging in the virtual environment. The 2020-21 school year will begin in July, so the time to problem solve is now. Many issues must be addressed immediately, and while some pressing issues are in the hands of local governing boards, we suggest the following legislative changes for our schools:

Prior Year Funding: Schools are facing an uncertain student population as families struggle to find the right solution for their children. This could mean that more students are staying home, either for homeschooling or for online instruction. We propose utilizing last year's student count to calculate a school's state aid. This would hold schools harmless in the event of declining enrollment due to COVID-19 issue.

Broadband Expansion: School children have starkly different access to technology throughout the state depending on where they live and their families' income levels. We must address the digital divide with broadband, hotspots and other infrastructure to facilitate distance learning for all students regardless of circumstances.

Student Support: We don't know yet how the school closure has impacted our students, but we know many will need extra support – both academic and social emotional – and our schools will need additional resources to meet those new and complicated needs. The legislature needs to provide help and academic interventions for special education and struggling students, so nobody is left behind.

Colleges and Universities: Enrollment for the fall is down significantly. Many international and out-of-state students will not be returning for the Fall semester, and with their absence comes a great loss of tuition revenue. It has been reported that in-state tuition will be frozen, but fees, housing, and meal plans will increase. We must appropriate sufficient funding to our colleges and universities to hold them harmless for the loss of this vital source of income.

Healthy Communities

The COVID-19 pandemic has put tremendous stress on Arizona's medical emergency response and hospital capacity, as well as essential industries like assisted living facilities and nursing homes. We must step up to provide better protection for workers, children, and teachers as Arizona reopens its economy and schools. This pandemic may not pass for months, or even years, so we must prepare for a "new normal" of social distancing and precautionary measures to help control and slow the spread. Our Healthy Communities plan:

Expand Telemedicine: While families are practicing social distancing and limiting their time outside their homes, telemedicine has been a lifeline for them – connecting them to medical professional and other therapies from the safety of their homes. These changes should be made permanent and should be expanded to include new categories of providers allowed to conduct telemedicine to improve healthcare while reducing in-person contact.

Paid Family Leave: The federal government extended paid family leave to its employees last year, and the state should take its lead and provide paid family leave to all state employees. This will allow state employees to spend time taking care of loved ones without fear of losing their income. This will also make it easier for state workers to stay home when they're sick, thereby reducing the spread of illness.

Care Facilities: Elderly loved ones have borne the brunt of social distancing by staying isolated from their family and friends in order to avoid becoming seriously ill. We should put protocols in place to allow screened visitation at care facilities, restricting access to only one to three designated visitors per patient.

Data Transparency: State agencies serve the public which means the data that they collect belongs to the people in the state and should not be hidden. Given questions surrounding often confusing data released by the Arizona Department of Health Services, we must improve oversight of the agency and require clearer explanation and sourcing for their COVID-19 data dashboard to improve transparency and accountability.

Protect Frontline Workers: Frontline workers – from grocery store workers to nurses, doctors and medical professionals, as well as day care workers and teachers – are essential for our state to respond to this pandemic and must be adequately protected. We need legislation that ensures our frontline essential healthcare workers, school employees and those who keep other essential businesses running have effective, adequate and replenishable supplies of PPE.

Indigenous Peoples

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating and disproportionate impact on Arizona's tribal nations. We must work together to address the immediate and underlying factors that have worsened the pandemic's spread while valuing the indigenous way of life, supporting local economies, and committing to equitable service. Our members have continuously pressed for, and will continue to press for, investments in senior citizen programs, veterans housing, tribal healthcare and technical education that could have improved COVID-19 response in tribal communities. Because the most immediately addressable factor contributing to the spread of COVID-19 in indigenous communities is lack of infrastructure, particularly running water and electricity, our primary proposal is:

Transaction Privilege Tax reform: Tribal communities pay their fair share of state sales tax (TPT) on products sold on their lands but are not able to retain those funds for their communities. It's time to change that. We need to empower Native Tribes by redirecting 100 percent of state sales taxes collected on tribal lands to combine with federal CARES Act monies to fund infrastructure and economic development on Tribal Nations.

Thriving Economy

COVID-19 has created economic distress and fallout that Arizonans could feel for years to come. To mitigate this, lawmakers must work together to ensure small businesses stay afloat and retain jobs, keep customers safe, and help workers weather the ongoing economic consequences of the pandemic. Our plan to help Arizona's economy recover:

Rebuild Small Business: Small businesses that had to shutter their doors in the early days of this pandemic need help to reopen and stay afloat as patrons slowly venture out of their homes. The state must create a small business grant fund to restart businesses recovering from the COVID-19 shutdown.

Workers Bill of Rights: Workers are rightfully afraid to reenter their work places as the COVID-19 numbers are rising, and they want to know that they are safe and have the equipment necessary to do their jobs without putting themselves and others at risk. Hard working Arizonans deserve a robust workers bill of rights that guarantees jobsite safety and whistleblower protections, workers compensation and streamlined unemployment insurance benefits.