

Congressional Hearing

Governor Laura Kelly remarks
Thursday, September 10, 2020

Chairwoman Waters, Ranking Member McHenry, and members of the Committee, I am Laura Kelly, Governor of Kansas.

Thank you for the invitation to testify on behalf of my state regarding our need for federal aid as we overcome the unprecedented challenges brought forth by COVID-19.

We have seen record numbers of weekly Unemployment Insurance benefits claims, which overwhelmed our Department of Labor's antiquated computer system.

At times, we have struggled to access Personal Protective Equipment for our health care workers and adequately test our population for COVID-19.

Our small businesses have suffered. Many have been unable to make up for lost revenue or were forced to furlough employees.

Through all these challenges, my administration has worked to keep Kansas families safe and healthy.

I'd also like to thank Congresswoman Sharice Davids, for being a strong advocate for Kansas small businesses during pandemic – including introducing legislation requiring transparency around relief funds to make sure they're getting to small businesses in Kansas, and not just fortune 500 companies.

However, we will need significantly more support from our federal partners to protect our institutions from drastic and damaging cuts.

Kansas is uniquely suited to address a looming budget crisis during these unprecedented times because we have already overcome one this decade – albeit self-inflicted, rather than an act of God.

In 2012, my predecessor, Governor Sam Brownback, signed into law one of the most significant income tax cuts in our state's history – tax cuts that largely benefitted the wealthiest Kansans.

The consequences were profound.

As a 14-year member of the State Senate, I watched in dismay as other states recovered and grew in the wake of the 2008 recession – while Kansas instead moved backward.

The state faced a \$900 million budget shortfall, school funding was drastically cut, infrastructure spending was decimated, and critical programs like Medicaid and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF, were gutted.

Kansas' bond rating was downgraded twice. Our agencies were hollowed out, our state highway and health care funds were robbed.

There are so many more examples – but the bottom line is that years of austerity hurt our business owners, our farmers, our children, our teachers, our essential workers, and our families.

Before the pandemic, my administration's budget was crafted to get Kansas back on sound financial footing – a process we expected would take years of responsible governance.

We have prioritized rebuilding our state's fiscal foundation.

We re-established economic development tools within our Department of Commerce, critical to ensuring Kansas can compete on a global scale.

We passed a historic ten-year transportation plan, and fully funded our K-12 education for the first time in years.

Thankfully, in 2017, a bipartisan group of legislators came together to undo the tax cuts implemented in 2012 and begin the uphill climb of closing the budget deficit.

Unfortunately, as we were righting the ship, we were hit with the worst public health crisis in a century.

This pandemic is different, and the fix isn't as simple as Kansas' government tightening our belt buckle.

Our federal partners must step in and help.

I know firsthand that cutting local government funding will hamstring states' ability to fight the pandemic and leave us more vulnerable to future ones.

Severe budget cuts don't create small government. They create failed government.

Governments that can't provide the essential services and investments this country was built on: good schools, stable infrastructure, and a robust social safety net, cannot succeed.

I had a front-row seat to the worst budget crisis in our state's history – and I know it hit the most vulnerable among us the hardest.

We need continued investments at the local level to allow for decisions that best respond to individual community needs.

We need support for strategic investments to stop the spread of the virus, enhance the state's ability to respond, protect our schools, and provide needed economic assistance to small businesses.

We need the federal government to support states and support Kansans who are struggling.

We need a coherent, top-down strategy that will reassure businesses and Americans that our government has a plan to keep our economy stable until a vaccine is available.

Thank you.