

## THE PANDEMIC ONE YEAR LATER - A BRIEF REVIEW (by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

March 11th is a significant date. As I write this article, the local news on the radio reminds me that one year ago today COVID-19 was officially announced as a pandemic in this country. A lot has happened in the twelve months since that announcement.

Not only have nearly 550,000 people died due to the virus, but millions of jobs have been lost or put on hold. Poverty has grown and already existing economic and social inequities have increased. The education of children has been disrupted, and the virus has exacerbated other social and psychological tensions in our society.

The murder of George Floyd also took place during this time period, and his death spurred a significant protest movement under the umbrella of Black Lives Matter to reform police practices and to end the double standard in our justice system that African Americans often confront. At the same time, political and social polarization promoted by then-President Trump continued to the point of increasing racism and worsening the pandemic in many states. Meanwhile, social media provided the networks for misinformation and alternative realities to thrive.

2020 was also a Presidential and Congressional election year. Despite the pandemic, a record number of voters voted by mail or at the polls on Election Day. Impeachable behavior, policies that were damaging the country, and his complete mismanagement of the pandemic finally caught up with Donald Trump, and he was soundly beaten by Joe Biden in November.

Nevertheless, during his final months in the White House, Trump used his position to attempt to invalidate the election, and he promoted an assault on the Capital Building to stop Congress from approving the Electoral College votes. A steady diet of lies about a fraudulent election, has left a sizable group of Americans believing that Biden is only President because of voter fraud. Thus, despite the replacement of the Trump Administration with a competent and progressive Administration, politics remains a bit scary with the Republican Party seemingly committed to its own success rather than to upholding democracy and the processes that make it work.

March 11th also remains significant as a day that comes between the passage of the \$1.9-trillion COVID-Relief Package by Congress and the President's signing the Bill into law. This package of relief programs has been called the most significant effort to provide a safety net for Americans since the New Deal. Besides \$14-billion for supplying vaccines and distributing them throughout the country, this Act includes \$350-billion for state and local governments, \$10-billion for state and local infrastructure projects, and \$130-billion for primary and secondary Public Schools. It also contains \$30-billion for transit agencies that have been crippled during the pandemic.

In terms of personal relief, the Law authorizes checks of \$1,400 to individuals earning up to \$80,000 a year, and couples filing jointly earning up to \$160,000 a year. A critical piece of the legislation will help families and individuals facing eviction or problems making rent or mortgage payments. \$45-billion is earmarked for rental, utility and mortgage assistance. In addition, federal unemployment payments of \$300 per week will also be extended until September 6th.

One unique part of this law that will immediately reduce child poverty across the country is the expansion of the child tax credit program to include low-income working families and families in poverty. These families will now qualify to receive \$300 per month for every child who is five years old or younger and \$250 per month for a six to seventeen year old child. Although the Bill fails to make this extension permanent, proponents hope that a dramatic reduction in child poverty will greatly increase their chances for making it so.

In conclusion, Cincinnati felt all the hardships of the pandemic. Poverty and food insecurity increased, and already existing economic and social inequities became more evident once this health crisis took hold. Its residents and institutions in need will greatly benefit from the funds flowing from the new federal stimulus and relief law. One local step that falls in line with this federal assistance package is the current grassroots initiative to increase City Government funding for affordable housing. Although a drop in the bucket compared to \$1.9-trillion, the \$50-million that voters will be asked to approve on May 4th would require the City to finally step up to the plate and do something significant to address the worsening affordable housing crisis in our midst.