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Bipartisan group of senators pushes back on Biden Covid plan

On a call with White House officials, senators objected to stimulus payments to wealthy Americans.

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A bipartisan group of senators told White House officials on Sunday that the stimulus spending in President Joe Biden's coronavirus relief plan provides too much money to high-income Americans, an opening setback in the new administration's complex pandemic negotiations with Congress.

Biden's proposal would provide \$1,400 direct payments to Americans, some of whom senators say don't need the money. Still, the discussion was civil and there was a "consensus" on the need to act urgently on vaccine distribution, said multiple senators on the call. It was also a sign that the Biden White House will be more hands on than former President Donald Trump, who nearly refused to sign the last relief bill after making a flurry of last-minute requests after the bill already passed Congress.

The bipartisan group of 16 senators held a call with Brian Deese, director of the White House National Economic Council, Jeff Zients, Biden's coronavirus coordinator, and Louisa Terrell, head of White House legislative affairs on Sunday afternoon — the first of what's sure to be many conversations between centrists and the Biden administration.

The 75-minute call, set up by Sen. Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.), is one of the first big calls the Biden administration has held as it works to build cross-party support for the \$1.9 trillion plan. Senators asked for more data on how the White House filled out its plan.

The senators told the White House officials they support spending more on vaccine distribution but some balked at the stimulus payments, urging the White House to make them targeted toward those in greater need, according to sources on the call. Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) pressed the Biden officials on why families making \$300,000 would be eligible and urged a focus on lower-income workers.

"I was the first to raise that issue, but there seemed to be a lot of agreement ... that those payments need to be more targeted," Collins said in an interview. "I would say that it was not clear to me how the administration came up with its \$1.9 trillion figure for the package."

Collins said that topline number was a "concern" to her and that her bipartisan crew, led by Collins and Manchin, needed to reconvene to figure out how to respond to a proposal that Republican senators say cannot pass the Senate. That group was key to passing a \$900 billion package in

December, which many Republicans say makes an immediate large package difficult to pass. That package included \$600 in direct payments to many Americans.

"I'm going to suggest that we get together and talk about what we think would be a reasonable package, and one that could garner bipartisan support," Collins said. "The administration clearly is very eager to move very quickly. And we want to make sure that there is justification, especially since there's so much money remaining from the previous packages."

Sen. Angus King (I-Maine) also questioned the price tag: "This isn't monopoly money," as he put it.

"There's a fundamental decision here on the part of the administration and that is do they want to work on the negotiation of a bipartisan proposal or do they want to try to move the larger package through reconciliation," King said of the partisan legislative tactic. "That didn't come up today explicitly but that's sort of in the background."

But King added the Biden officials on the call were open to the senators' input, and the topline number was specifically discussed on the call. "If they were interested in just jamming this through they wouldn't have interrupted the Packers game," he joked, adding that both the White House and senators were eager to find an agreement.

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.) praised the new White House for setting up a call so quickly with the bipartisan group, a departure from the prior administration. She said senators requested more data on the status of state and local governments' funding relief to get "a better sense" of the administration's "priorities" and how they crafted the plan.

Within days of taking office, Biden signed **more than a dozen** executive actions aimed at tackling the pandemic, including mandating face masks on federal properties; invoking the Defense Production Act to improve vaccine supplies; and directing FEMA to designate a Covid-19 liaison to coordinate with states.

"We're in a national emergency. It's time we treat it like one," Biden said last week. "This is a wartime undertaking."