



ATTENTION!

THE AMERICAN RESCUE ACT

COUNTIES AND MUNICIPALITIES RECEIVED BILLIONS THAT CAN HELP CHILDREN BENEFIT FROM BUILD BACK BETTER



Pennsylvania's counties and municipalities received \$6.15 billion in funds to help communities and families rebound from the pandemic; these funds must be spent by the end of 2024. These funds are on top of funds received by local governments. To find out how much your county and municipal governments received, [click here](#).

These funds can be used to:

1. Help families, businesses, and non-profits get back on their feet and help entire sectors rebuild their customer base and workforce.
2. Make grants to businesses or non-profits for the purpose of increasing the pay of essential workers up to \$13 per hour (in addition to wages already received), with a ceiling of \$25,000 per individual.
3. Avoid future cuts in government services to the extent that the cuts are a result of a reduction in local revenue due to the pandemic.
4. Invest in water, sewer, or broadband infrastructure.

Additional funds are also available to pay for vaccine distribution and COVID testing, and for county-run behavioral health services, nursing homes, local offices of aging, county-managed eviction protection programs, and homeless services.

To help families, businesses, and non-profits get back on their feet, counties and municipalities should think about the needs of children by doing at least the following to help families:

1. Assess and close resource gaps for child-serving organizations so parents can return to work with confidence their children are safe and nurtured.
2. Boost the pay of low-wage workers who cared for children during the pandemic.
3. Invest in summer and afterschool programs so parents can go to work and children are safe and nurtured.
4. Help parents find jobs.
5. Close the digital divide by connecting and supporting families to maintain reliable and adequate Internet services to tap health care, employment, and social supports.
6. Improve housing and water services in ways that reduce the risk of childhood lead poisoning.



Specifically, PCCY recommends the following steps for county and municipal managers:

1. Assess and address needs of child-serving organizations

Reach out to all child-serving organizations including school districts, child care providers, pre-K and Head Start programs, foster care and juvenile justice, early intervention, behavioral health and youth services entities to assess their needs with respect to:

- a. Close resource gaps for in-person services to children – Make sure all child-serving organizations and programs are ready to provide in-person services to children this summer and all next school year, in accordance with COVID safe practices, and use Rescue Act funds to address any resource shortages that would preclude children from engaging in in-person programs or services.
- b. Prepare/train staff to understand and address the impact of the pandemic on the social and emotional impact on children – Identify special training needs for staff, including training to address the critical social-emotional learning needs of children as a result of the pandemic.
- c. Make sure children are safe – Spend funds to intensify home visits for children in foster care, or families who are struggling because their children were not consistent in their school or childcare attendance. Every effort must be made to make sure children were and are not suffering from abuse or neglect during the shutdown and that families are connected with needed social services and supports.
- d. Leave no vacancy unfilled – Many youth-serving organizations, including schools and child care centers, may need extra help finding workers to staff up for the summer and the fall. Where agencies are facing labor shortages, Rescue Act funds can be used to organize special job fairs or common marketing efforts to recruit unemployed and skilled local parents for jobs available in these two critical sectors.
- e. Make an extra effort to check in on families with limited English skills – The Rescue Plan and the two previous relief bills include substantial resources to help small businesses and families recover from the pandemic. Rescue Plan funds can be used to hire special outreach staff to ensure immigrant-owned businesses and immigrant families can learn about these resources in their native languages. Funds can also be used to translate county information specifically around health care services, social supports, and grants or resources to help families rebound.

2. Boost the pay of low-wage workers who cared for children during the pandemic

Parents relied on child care programs throughout the pandemic to care for children while they worked. These workers are among some of the lowest paid in the labor force, often working for wages less than are paid at “big-box stores.” Where child care staff went to work daily and put their lives on the line to care for children, they should be rewarded for that sacrifice with the local Rescue Act funds available specifically to pay essential workers. To the extent that other child-serving organizations were also open and meeting the needs of families during the pandemic, the lower paid workers should be prioritized for the special essential worker payments.



3. Reconnect every child this summer

To help parents return to work and help children develop good routines, fund summer camps and other enrichment programs so that the maximum number of children are engaged in positive, in-person socialization activities. It's especially important to recruit children who did not attend virtual or hybrid instruction regularly so they can be readied for school in September. Further, to the extent that townships or youth organizations do not have enough funding for after school programs during the next school year, Rescue Act funds can be used to fill those gaps.

4. Help parents find jobs

Thousands of parents lost their jobs during the pandemic and still others may not have been able to find work even before the pandemic. Counties must create real connections between their County Workforce Board and municipalities with the goal of finding every parent who can work and helping them reconnect to employment. Rescue Act funds can be used to support municipal re-employment workshops or job fairs at the municipal level or across nearby municipalities so that parents can easily engage with re-employment services. Employment/re-employment efforts must recognize that many parents are still caring for children at home so the hours and locations of outreach events must be scheduled in ways that optimize participation by parents.

5. Close the digital divide for all families

The Rescue Act is THE chance to Build Back Better and a part of doing so means improving technology that can support learning and connection to social supports for children. Counties and local governments can use these funds to make sure every family has Internet service, sufficient speed and bandwidth to connect to telemedicine and social services, and modern computers or devices.

Counties must work together with their municipalities to create a common plan for capturing data for every household with respect to ISP access and speed. To the extent that there is a gap in access, reasonable speeds, or regular interruptions in bandwidth, counties should meet with ISP providers to solve the access issues with ISP provider resources first.

Funds from the Rescue Act can be used to provide technical support for families who are not tech savvy and have yet to use the Internet for education, telemedicine, or accessing social supports. PCCY suggests a three-step process:

1. Counties and municipalities spend Rescue Act funds on a low-cost method of finding these families in partnership with local ISP providers.
2. Contract with a local or regional organization to help families tap federal funds for reduced price ISP access and administer a system to give out low-cost or free computers that can support online access to services and supports. These entities must also train families to use the computer for telemedicine and other services and operate a "help desk" so families can build their capacity over time to use the Internet for problem solving, service access, and learning.
3. To reach the most "disconnected" families, Rescue Act funds must enable all services to be available to families in their native language.



6. Get ahead in preventing lead poisoning

Counties and municipalities can use Rescue Act funds to reduce the risk of childhood lead poisoning in two ways:

- a. Housing assistance funds – Where counties release funds for eviction protection, they can couple those funds with requirements that landlords comply with their housing codes and ensure no chipping paint and ideally ensure every rental unit is lead-safe. Where landlords cannot afford to make a unit lead-safe, counties can work with their community action agency or local housing office to increase funds available for lead remediation.
- b. Water improvements – Child care centers in Pennsylvania are required to ensure that there are no trace elements of lead in the water coming out of their spigots. When considering what water upgrades are needed, complete a survey of the water quality in every child care center and, where trace elements of lead are found, replace the water service line with these funds.

All Rescue Act funds must be accounted for separately so that citizens and federal agencies can see and audit the expenditures and ensure that none of the expenses are used to pay for pension costs of existing public services unless local revenues declined due to the pandemic putting those services at risk. PCCY urges counties and municipalities to hold at least one public meeting to gather input on how these funds can best be used, and at least one public meeting to share with citizens once it is decided how these funds will be specifically deployed.

As of the beginning of April, the federal government was still working out all the details for how Rescue Plan funds can be spent. Meanwhile, counties and local government can get ready to make the wisest use of these funds and help families get back on their feet by engaging children and youth in activities, looking out for their safety, and supporting their return to normal routines.

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