New RMAPI 2020 Policy Agenda:
Call Your Legislator Toolkit

We need your help to advocate for critical policies that fight against poverty and address structural racism in our community.

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, recent events in Rochester, and the disproportionate impact on people affected by poverty, the RMAPI Policy Working Group recommends four additions to RMAPI’s 2020 policy priorities:

1. Provide income support directly to individuals so they can maintain stability and keep their families healthy and safe
2. Ensure that state and municipal governments have sufficient funding to meet people’s needs
3. Identify and support policies that dismantle structural racism
4. Protect important poverty-reduction programs from devastating budget cuts by amending the New York State tax code to raise taxes on the highest income tax brackets

Your voice is important!

Below you will find a description of these priorities and a toolkit for reaching out to legislators who can put them in place.

Contents of this Toolkit:

- Identify your legislators
- Select phone script and policies
  1. Provide income support directly to individuals so they can maintain stability and keep their families healthy and safe
  2. Ensure that state and municipal governments have sufficient funding to meet people’s needs
  3. Identify and support policies that dismantle structural racism
  4. Protect important poverty-reduction programs from devastating budget cuts by amending the New York State tax code to raise taxes on the highest income tax brackets
Step 1: Identify which legislators to call
You can use this tool provided by the League of Women Voters to find your elected officials from each level of government: https://salsa.wiredforchange.com/o/5950/c/10065/getLocal4.jsp

Please note: Due to the COVID-19 crisis, some offices of elected officials may be closed. Most officials provide capitol and district office numbers—at least one of these numbers should still be taking calls.

Step 2: Select phone script and make the call
Tip: Be short and direct. Elected officials receive hundreds of calls a day, so they keep track of constituent opinions using tallies of “in favor of,” or “opposed to.” You don’t have to explain yourself at length.

1. Provide income support directly to individuals so they can maintain stability and keep their families healthy and safe

Which representatives to contact: US Senators and US Representatives

About this policy: The Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative conducted a community survey reaching more than 500 respondents and found widespread concern about falling behind on bills of all kinds, challenges in paying for basic supplies, and that people who received the CARES Act stimulus payments used them to catch up on bills.

These data points indicate that people need direct income now to maintain stability and keep their families healthy and safe. Income going directly to people would alleviate concern around evictions or foreclosure, help with car payments, child care costs, food, essential cleaning supplies, PPE, etc. – all of the basic needs people need to maintain stability in their lives.

Phone script and talking points:
Hi, my name is_____. I'm a constituent from the town/city of______, and my zip code is______. I am calling to support federal policies that would increase income by providing resources directly to individuals such as the “Monthly Economic Crisis Support Act.”

Optional talking points
• We know that because of the COVID-19 crisis, individuals are falling behind on bills of all kinds, there are challenges in paying for basic supplies, and people who received the CARES Act stimulus payments used them to catch up on bills.

• I support a bill that ensures a minimum income for a long enough time period to help people recover from the economic impact of COVID-19.

• I also support a bill that focuses those resources on individuals and families that are struggling the most, and ensures that they can easily access those resources.

2. Ensure that states and municipal governments have sufficient funding to meet people’s needs

Which representatives to contact: US Senators and US Representatives

About this policy: States and localities are facing significant budget shortfalls due to the COVID-19 crisis which will impact much-needed services and resources for the Rochester and Monroe County community. The federal government has a role to play in helping overcome these financial challenges.

That said, it is important to also learn from this pandemic and what has been learned in terms of coordinating supports and services. There is an opportunity for states and localities to “build back better,” but they need the financial support of the federal government to do so.

Phone script and talking points:
Hi, my name is______. I'm a constituent from the town/city of______, and my zip code is______. I am calling to support federal policies that would provide financial relief to states and localities to meaningfully redesign systems and make them more accessible and responsive to people’s needs.

Optional talking points

• Community members continue to face challenges related to accessibility and affordability of food, childcare, housing, and other basic needs. People also expect to need supports in getting back to work – finding jobs, finding training opportunities, figuring out transportation, and adjusting to new workplace expectations. These much-needed resources are facing massive budget cuts without federal relief.

• While there are public systems in place to support all of these needs, they are cumbersome and confusing to access, fragmented, and require people experiencing poverty to continually retell their story and prove they deserve benefits, which reinforces their trauma.
• We also know that in order for systems to “build back better,” federal support is needed; but that federal support needs to allow for the flexibility systems need to make changes.

• Specific legislation you could act on now includes:
  o Support the provision in the HEROES Act to increase minimum and maximum SNAP benefits
  o Support provisions in the Emergency Housing Protections and Relief Act that would fund emergency rental assistance; expand eligibility for rental assistance to individuals and families at risk of homelessness; a homeowner assistance fund to prevent mortgage defaults and foreclosures; funding for public housing and tenant-based rental assistance; funding for supportive housing and Section 8; and funding for housing counseling services.

3. Identify and support policies that dismantle structural racism

Which representatives to contact: US Senators, US Representatives, State Senators, State Representatives

About this policy area: From the beginning, RMAPI identified three Guiding Principles: Address Structural Racism, Address Trauma, Build Community. We are looking to support policies that intentionally aim to dismantle structural racism at all levels of government and organizations.

Phone script and talking points:
Hi, my name is______. I’m a constituent from the town/city of______, and my zip code is______. I am calling to support policies that would dismantle structural racism.

Policy options we are eager to explore include: changing restrictive zoning laws in housing; incentivizing affordable housing development in areas with low rates of poverty; supporting and incentivizing small business grocery stores and other basic needs provision in high-poverty neighborhoods; addressing health care disparities that have been highlighted by the COVID-19 crisis; and examining the intersection between school segregation and poverty.

Optional talking points
• It is foolish to think that we can counteract poverty without directly confronting racism in all of its forms.
• Racism is a primary antecedent to poverty. For many people of color, it is the driving force to economic and social/emotional oppression.
• Structural racism needs to be addressed in all policy focus areas – from housing to the justice system and everything in between.

4. Protect important poverty-reduction programs from devastating budget cuts by amending the New York State tax code to raise taxes on the highest income tax brackets

Which representatives to contact: State Senators, State Representatives

About this policy: The state needs new revenue or else there will likely be significant, across-the-board budget cuts. This will impact all services that the state provides, and will make it more difficult for people in poverty to access needed supports.

An immediate solution to this pending financial crisis is to implement a short-term tax increase on the highest income tax brackets (millionaires and billionaires). This new revenue will help the state avoid the devastating budget cuts it is currently facing, maintaining services for our lowest income neighbors.

Phone script and talking points:
Hi, my name is_____. I'm a constituent from the town/city of______, and my zip code is______. I am calling to support policies that would make necessary changes to the New York State tax code to implement a short-term tax increase on the highest income tax brackets.

This new revenue will help the state avoid the devastating budget cuts it is currently facing, maintaining the funding of programs that help people move out of poverty.

Optional talking points
• There is concern in the community about accessibility of basic needs as the economy reopens; need for long-term support to help people recover financially
• Support a short-term increase in taxes for highest income levels in New York State in order to raise revenue and prevent budget cuts to needed programs/services