

2021 COVID-19 Forward

By Senator Pete Campos

As a global community, we have been living with the effects of the COVID-19 virus for more than a year. Over two million deaths have been attributed to the virus worldwide. There have been 425,000 deaths in the United States alone, with nearly 3,200 of those deaths in New Mexico. Along with this catastrophic loss of life, we have experienced challenges in providing medical care to the patients who have fallen ill due to complications of the virus and obstacles to providing social services to those who need them the most. Finally, we have dealt with lifestyle changes that have diminished our quality of life.

On the brighter side of a challenging year, we have witnessed great breakthroughs in science and research. Empirical results have shown that wearing a mask, safe distancing and washing hands regularly can greatly reduce the quick spread of the virus. Furthermore, research has led to the development of COVID-19 vaccines. The current challenge is to mass produce those vaccines and get them to the public as quickly as possible. The health and safety of the public is of paramount importance, but there are other challenges that need our attention if we are to return to any semblance of normal life.

Economic recovery is a hurdle that the federal and state government must overcome quickly. In November 2020, Governor Lujan Grisham signed a \$330 million economic relief package to address these economic needs. The package provided for \$100 million in grants for small businesses, a one-time \$1,200 New Mexico worker pandemic benefit to those claiming unemployment, \$15 million for emergency housing assistance, \$5 million for direct assistance to low-income residents, \$5 million for emergency food services and \$10 million to the Department of Health to support COVID-19 contact tracing, testing and vaccine distribution efforts. While this package helped many businesses and families in New Mexico, there is still much to be done. Our children need to return to school, and businesses need to reopen so people can return to work.

This global health downturn has created a larger gap between the wealthy and working poor. Recovering from this separation of the wealthy and the poor has left us thinking of ways to

strengthen the working class while remaining aware of the challenges we must overcome to return to the way we lived just a year ago.

We cannot let our working class slip further away from prosperity or let our diversified culture erode. We must accelerate the progress that has been made to educate our youth. We must provide greater access to health care for our veterans, elderly and disabled. We must bring back jobs from abroad. We must rethink how our resilience will take us forward faster because of the time we have lost during this global health emergency. As we consider the ways that we get New Mexicans back to work and live healthier lives, there is optimism. Prioritizing what is most important to us—our families—makes that positive difference.

It is clear that communication, investment and experience will be key to rebuilding the economy. We need to rebuild our communication channels and re-grow human interaction to stimulate innovation and new initiatives. We need to provide incentives for our youth to seek the education and training that will allow them to meet new economic demands. Times are changing. Restaurants may lean more toward meals to-go, vehicles may become all electric in record time, wind and solar farms may sprout up more frequently all over the country and people may spend more time protecting their local, natural landscapes. We will put family before the long hours spent at the office. The reshaping of our priorities has begun! This session will be the next step in supporting fiscal stimulus and policy changes that will help jobs, small businesses and our strained economy. We need to get back to life—the best we can!