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HELPING THE NATION RECOVER

July 2020
ARISE Philippines Bill aims for national recovery

Responding to the nation’s urgent need for an immediate and targeted response to the damage caused by the COVID-19 crisis, the House of Representatives passed on final reading a P1.3-billion economic stimulus bill designed to hasten national recovery.

House Bill 6815, or the “Accelerated Recovery and Investments Stimulus for the Economy of the Philippines” legislation (shortened as the ARISE Philippines Bill), opens up government funding to help the economy get up on its feet, focusing on those most marginalized by the pandemic.

Approved on June 4, 2020, the bill pinpoints four key economic interventions—transitional, financial, sectoral, and structural—to provide immediate relief to critically impacted businesses. Principal authors include Reps. Joey Sarte Salceda (2nd Dist., Albay), Stella Luz Quimbo (2nd Dist., Marikina), and Sharon Garin (Party-List, AAMBIS-OWA) of the Defeat COVID-19 Committee’s economic stimulus subcommittee.

Transitional interventions are intended to mitigate the permanent damage by COVID-19 crisis to the economy and maintain employment levels of the corresponding sector or industry within a specified period. To this end, the bill pushes for P110 billion in wage subsidies, P5 billion in aid to displaced workers, and P42 billion in various subsidies to schools and students.

Financial interventions aim to accelerate recovery and improve viability of business entities by broadening financial and credit access. This covers the establishment of a Credit Mediation and Restructuring Service and provision of loans to MSME+, interest-free loans, and loan guarantees. Small businesses are allotted P45 billion in special COVID-19 loans for 2020, and another P25 billion for 2021. Government-controlled banks shall offer P50 billion from a special interest-free fund for other enterprises.

Sectoral interventions are designed for specific critically impacted industries and businesses. The tourism sector shall receive P58 billion in interest-free loans, credit facilities and other programs. For the transport sector, including those involved in public utility vehicles, P70 billion will be offered for emergency credit lines, grants and subsidies. The agriculture sector shall be granted P66 billion to maintain rice buffer stocks, establish additional markets for small farmers and fisherfolks, and increase food production.

Finally, structural interventions reinforce the resilience of the economy in the event of future crisis or recession. Such will receive the lion’s share of P650 billion, 20 percent of which shall be appropriated and released in 2020, 40 percent in 2021, and 40 percent in 2022. Chief among these is the Enhanced Build, Build, Build Program, which shall expand to include projects in Universal Health Care, housing, education, transportation, security, and information communication technology.

In a report by the House-based thinktank Congressional Policy and Budget Research Department (CPBRD), HB 6815 is regarded as a key to the country’s economic recovery. It minimizes the “economic scar tissue” of COVID-19 by limiting bankruptcies and ensuring continuity of the public’s purchasing power, the CBRD said.
ADDRESSING the drop in employment caused by the pandemic, the House of Representatives approved HB 6920, or the proposed “COVID-19 Unemployment Reduction Economic Stimulus (CURES) Act” on June 5, 2020 to create massive opportunities through a nationwide infrastructure-building program.

CURES is a P1.5-trillion, multi-targeted measure that generates sustainable jobs and widens income-earning opportunities, patterned after historic government initiatives to spend on infrastructure in the wake of major economic downturns, wars and calamities. The bill’s principal authors—among them Deputy Speakers Lray Villafuerte, Paolo Duterte, and Loren Legarda—intend CURES to build projects that will hire and benefit people, particularly in the sectors of health, education, agriculture and local infrastructure (shortened as HEAL sectors) in the next three fiscal years.

CURES prioritizes the construction, expansion, rehabilitation, and upgrading of national and regional hospitals, municipal and barangay health centers, testing centers, and isolation facilities for communicable diseases. It will fund the comprehensive digitization of the country’s public healthcare system to efficiently respond to COVID-19 and other health-related concerns.

The bill also aims to construct or improve school buildings for the purpose of decongesting school facilities, adding alternative and technical-vocational learning centers, and establishing information and technology hubs in public educational, training or learning institutions.

Agriculture projects include the construction, repair and improvement of agricultural training and research centers as well as trading hubs and food terminals. CURES will allocate funding for farm-to-market roads not only to improve rural access to commerce but also to healthcare facilities in the provinces.

New and improved roads in the countryside will boost tourism, among the hardest hit sectors by the ongoing pandemic, by encouraging domestic travel, even as the bill provides help in creating the electronic infrastructure for online promotions and bookings.
As the Effectivity of Republic Act 11469 or the “Bayanihan to Heal as One Act” lapsed in June 2020, the House of Representatives started working on the passage of House Bill 6953 or the proposed “Bayanihan to Recover as One Act” to supplement and build on the gains of the old law.

The new bill provides for COVID-19 response and recovery interventions, mechanisms to bolster the resiliency of the country’s economy, and a P162-billion standby fund to implement these measures.

As an initial step to ease the approval of the “Bayanihan to Recover as One” measure, the House constituted itself into a Committee of the Whole on June 3, 2020 and approved the committee report on the consolidation of three House bills with similar intents into a single substitute bill, HB 6953. The House will resume floor deliberations on the bill during the Second Regular Sessions which opens July 27, 2020.

Deputy Speaker Luis Raymund “Lray” Villafuerte Jr., principal author of HB 6953, said the bill aggressively pursues efforts to contain the transmission of COVID-19 while making available various reliefs to Filipinos as the disrupted economy starts to open up.

Moreover, Villafuerte said HB 6953 proposes to undertake COVID-19 response and recovery interventions that stick to World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations and standards, including the testing of a percentage of the population through streamlined accreditation of polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing kits in designated institutions.

The bill appropriates a P162-billion standby fund to be used for support operations and response measures to address the COVID-19 pandemic. These are: (1) P50 billion for capital infusion to government financial institutions (GFIs) for low-interest loans and credit guarantees; (2) P21 billion for assistance for the jobless and displaced workers; (3) P21 billion for the direct cash subsidy, interest-free loans, and other assistance to qualified agri-fishery enterprises, farmers, and fisherfolk; (4) P21 billion for critically impacted businesses in the transportation industry; (5) P18 billion for the Cash for Work (C4W) Program and the Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers (TUPAD) Program; (6) P12 billion for the procurement of PCR testing and extraction kits, supplies, materials, and reagents for COVID-19 testing and enhancement of DOH capacities to provide health care services; (7) P10 billion for critically impacted tourism businesses; (8) P5 billion for the DSWD’s Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situation Program; (9) P3 billion for SUCs to develop smart campuses through investments in helpful technologies; and (10) P1 billion for TESDA training institutions.

“Bayanihan to Recover as One” bill builds on quarantine gains

Majority Leader Martin Romualdez and Deputy Speaker Lray Villafuerte (second and third from left), with colleagues in the House floor, rally support for the expedited passage of the Bayanihan to Recover as One bill or “Bayanihan 2” to give continued special powers to the President to contain the COVID-19 pandemic “especially in an accelerated stage” as the economy reopens and people become more mobile after strict quarantine.

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A BILL to help eradicate COVID-19 infections through the conduct of mandatory baseline polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing for vulnerable members of society hurdled third reading in June 2020.

HB 6865, or the “Crushing COVID-19 Act,” principally authored by Rep. Janette Garin (1st Dist., Iloilo) and co-authored by members of the House health committee chaired by Rep. Angelina Tan (4th Dist., Quezon), seeks to secure the public health gains attained during the national quarantine period and stop the transmission of the disease by testing specific vulnerable sectors.

Identified as “vulnerable” under the bill are patients or healthcare workers with severe or critical symptoms, mild symptoms, and those who demonstrated no symptoms but with relevant history of travel or contact; non-healthcare frontliners responding against COVID-19; persons with co-morbidities, and other health risks such as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, pulmonary diseases, cancer, renal failure, obesity, pregnancy, old age, and the immuno-compromised who are returning to work.

Also to undergo PCR testing shall be persons entering Philippine territory coming from abroad; workers who are holders of quarantine passes who do most errands for their families during quarantine; and medical patients prior to a procedure, operation or treatment.

The Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth) shall cover the whole cost of testing, including pathology and laboratory expenses, while foreign nationals shall bear the cost of testing. To further boost mass testing in the country, the House Defeat COVID Committee (DCC) subcommittee on Economic Stimulus included P20 billion for COVID-19 mass testing in 2020 and 2021 in House Bill 6815 or the “ARISE Philippines” Bill.

To supplement efforts to institutionalize mandatory COVID-19 testing, the Committee on Health emphasized the importance of real-time COVID-19 data from government agencies on a meeting held May 19. Subsequently, on May 28, it created a technical working group that would consolidate HB 6081, establishing the public health emergency council, and HB 6493, providing for a national health security amid the current pandemic.
HOUSE Members approved on third and final reading HB 6817 seeking to prohibit and penalize discriminatory acts against persons who are declared as confirmed, suspected, probable and recovered cases of COVID-19, repatriated Filipinos, healthcare workers, responders, and service workers.

The proposed “COVID-19-Related Anti-Discrimination Act” approved on June 2, 2020 seeks to end discrimination inimical to COVID-19 patients and frontliners. In his explanatory note on the bill, Quezon City Rep. Jose Christopher Belmonte said the bill reinforces “an environment that recognizes dignity for all, the heroism in the work of our health workers, responders, and service workers in the frontline” by placing safeguards brought on by the stigma of COVID-19.

HB 6817 clearly defines discrimination as “any act of unjust distinction, exclusion or restriction, which has the effect of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment, and exercise on an equal footing of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil, or any field of the public life of a person, or which tends to have an effect of endangering the person’s life, safety, and security, particularly against: (1) declared confirmed, suspect, and probable cases of COVID-19, (2) recovered cases of COVID-19, (3) essential and frontline workers, (4) healthcare workers, (5) responders, (6) recognized volunteers, (7) stranded individuals traveling from one local government unit to another, (8) service workers, (9) repatriated overseas Filipino workers, and (10) families and members of the households of persons mentioned above.”

Discriminatory acts stated in the measure include: (a) failure to give assistance, (b) verbal, physical or psychological harassment, threatening or assault, (c) stigmatization, and (d) refusal to honor valid and existing contracts.

Those who commit acts of harassment or assault against persons with COVID-19 shall be penalized with imprisonment of 10 years or a fine of P200,000 up to P1 million. Individuals who fail to give assistance to persons with COVID-19 and stigmatize a person with COVID-19 shall suffer imprisonment of five years, or a fine of not more than P500,000.
CONGRESSIONAL oversight bodies are probing consumer burdens that emerge as the country reels from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Committee on Good Government and Public Accountability, chaired by Rep. Jose Antonio Sy-Alvarado (1st District, Bulacan), conducted a series of hearings to investigate numerous complaints filed by citizens who got shocking bills for high electric consumption during the quarantine. In July, Deputy Speaker Dan Fernandez questioned the approval of the Energy Regulatory Commission (ERC) of the distribution contract between Meralco and the First Gas Power Corporation (FGPC) and intends to check if the consuming public is being overcharged. The ERC admitted to Rep. Jesus Crispin Remulla (7th Dist., Cavite) that RA 9136, or the Electric Power Industry Reform Act (EPIRA) of 2001, which promised consumers twenty years ago that electricity costs would go down, has not been effected until now.

Rep. Virgilio Lacson (Party-List, Manila Teachers), Chairman of the Committee on Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, and Rep. Isagani Carlos Zarate (Party-List, Bayan Muna) authored HRs 882 and 879, respectively to look into the alleged irregularities of different agencies and their officials and employees, government and private, on the overcharging of electric consumption bills by Meralco and various other electric cooperatives.

Rep. Lacson aired the complaints of the MSME sector which claimed that despite the closure of their business establishments during the pandemic, their electric consumption bills unreasonably and surprisingly increased. Energy Regulatory Board officials explained that deficiencies in meter reading by Meralco caused problems.

Meanwhile, the House, through HR 937, looked into issues surrounding the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) cash assistance to 18 million Filipino households during the Luzon-wide Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) during its implementation last April and May 2020.

Complaints surfaced over the handing out of cash emergency subsidies amounting to P5,000 to P8,000, complicated process for Social Amelioration Card (SAC) application, and miscommunication between the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and Local Government Units (LGUs).

Lastly, to check on the implementation of RA 11223 or Universal Health Care Act (UHCA) during the pandemic, the first Joint Congressional Oversight Committee held a meeting on June 16. Health Secretary Francisco Duque III and Philhealth CEO Ricardo Morales explained to Members of both Houses why universal health care seemed unable to cope with current challenges in delivering services at this time.

Legislators strongly urged Philhealth to suspend the increase in premiums charged to migrant Filipino workers. They proposed amendments to RA 11223 to make it functional and more responsive to common health needs of the public while keeping its funding sustainable.

The oversight committee is co-chaired by House Committee on Health Chairperson Rep. Angelina “Helen” Tan M.D. and Senate Committee on Health and Demography Chairman Senator Christopher Lawrence “Bong” Go.

Resource speaker Dr. Arthur C. Tolentino, PhD, LMFT, RPsu, discussed with more than 70 participants from various House offices different ways of coping up with stress in the workplace and work-from-home arrangement. He said that under this pandemic that requires most employees to work in their residences, stress occurs with lack of concentration or divided attention because workers have to deal with family and work concerns at the same time.

The United States-based speaker told participants the importance of setting boundaries by identifying a workplace and marking fixed hours of work at home. Dr. Tolentino also emphasized that it is important to take short breaks in daily work to dispel stressful moments. He also suggests that there should be a mental health first responder in every office to provide employees with primary care during emergencies.

Dr. Tolentino is the program developer of Mental Health First Response and Mental Health First Responder. He is the founder and clinical director of Pathways Mental Health Services, LLC in Lacey and Longview, Washington, USA. He also supervises the Pathways Telehealth Clinics and the Telehealth International Clinics Pathways MHS. He has practiced in the field of behavioural health since 1994.

Donations gathered from salaries of House Members enabled the provision of essential goods to workers and frontliners in Quezon City and Cebu. Photo shows Speaker Alan Peter “Compañero” S. Cayetano leading the turnover of food and vitamin donations to the 1,350 tricycle drivers from District 1, Quezon City, and 2,000 barangay health workers from District 4, Quezon City. Rep. Jesus “Bong” Suntay (4th District, Quezon City), together with barangay captains, accepted the donations for his district at the House of Representatives on July 6, 2020. The House leadership also announced that donations consisting of much needed health and medical supplies (2000 sets of PPEs, 200 boxes of A-D-C plus vitamins, 200 pieces of infrared thermometers, among others), 10 units of Lenovo laptops, and P1 million pesos are on their way to support Cebu’s frontliners. Speaker Cayetano assured the public of the chamber’s commitment to pass the second Bayanihan law and other stimulus measures to accelerate economic recovery nationwide in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.
SOLDIERING on amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the House of Representatives in the 18th Congress led by Speaker Alan Peter “Compañero” Cayetano posted a harvest of 8,203 bills and resolutions responding to the country’s concerns filed from the start of the First Regular Session on July 22, 2019 up to July 20, 2020.

Of that total, 19 became new laws, 13 are awaiting President Rodrigo Roa Duterte’s signature, one is pending at the bicameral committee, 250 hurdled third and final reading, 32 passed second reading, and 74 became adopted resolutions. (Official statistics may be accessed here.)

The legislative record achieved by the House in this period marks one of its most productive First Regular Sessions in recent history. It is highlighted by the agile response of Speaker Cayetano and the House to the drastic changes under the pandemic, immediately responding with the enactment of the RA 11469, or Bayanihan to Heal as One Act.

The Speaker also created the Defeat COVID-19 Ad Hoc Committee in March to supervise all matters relating to the appropriate government response on the pandemic, and craft strategies to curb its effect on the economy and the general public.

To help the country cope and triumph over COVID-19, the House approved on final reading a number of significant bills. These include: (1) HB 6817, “Prohibiting the Discrimination Against Persons who are Declared Confirmed, Suspect, Probable and Recovered Cases of COVID-19, Repatriated Filipinos, Healthcare Workers, Responders, and Service Workers and Providing Penalties for Violation Thereof”;
(2) HB 6816, “Ensuring Philippine Financial Industry Resiliency Against The COVID-19 Pandemic or FIST”;

Speaker Cayetano underscored the power of the House to uplift Filipinos in tough times in his speech before House colleagues on March 11. “Now that we are facing many challenges, it is now the House of the People who should give us hope, who should inspire us, who should show the people that we have faith, not fear. Yes, if you spell the House of the People, it will go to the word HOPE,” the Speaker said.

Reliable House produces relevant and responsive legislation

the conduct of baseline polymerase chain reaction covid-19 testing for the vulnerable members of society to stop the transmission of the covid-19 disease; and (5) HB 6920, “the COVID-19 unemployment reduction economic stimulus (CURES) Act of 2020.”

Speaker Alan Peter “Compañero” Cayetano leads the reliable, relevant, and responsible House of Representatives through one of the most trying periods in history, requiring agile legislative responses to a nation coping with a raging pandemic, among many challenges.