

commenters finding that business subsidies have limited or negative economic impact also suggests that such a response may not be reasonably designed to benefit households and other entities impacted by the pandemic. Similarly, planning activities for an economic development or workforce strategy regarding general future economic growth do not provide a program, service, or capital expenditure that responds to negative economic impacts of the pandemic.

However, Treasury notes that the final rule includes as enumerated eligible uses many types of assistance that respond to negative economic impacts of the pandemic and may produce economic development benefits. For example, see sections Assistance to Unemployed Workers, Assistance to Small Businesses, and Capital Expenditures.

B. PREMIUM PAY

Background and Summary of the Interim Final Rule

Sections 602(c)(1)(B) and 603(c)(1)(B) of the Social Security Act, as added by the ARPA, provide that SLFRF funds may be used “to respond to workers performing essential work during the COVID-19 public health emergency by providing premium pay to eligible workers of the . . . government that are performing such essential work, or by providing grants to eligible employers that have eligible workers who perform essential work.”

Premium pay is designed to compensate workers that, by virtue of their employment, were forced to take on additional burdens and make great personal sacrifices as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Premium pay can be thought of as hazard pay by another name.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁸ See U.S. Department of Labor, *Hazard Pay*, <https://www.dol.gov/general/topic/wages/hazardpay> (last visited October 18, 2021).

During the public health emergency, employers' policies on COVID-19-related premium pay or hazard pay have varied widely, with many essential workers not yet compensated for the heightened risks they have faced and continue to face.²⁵⁹ Many of these workers earn lower wages on average and live in socioeconomically underserved communities as compared to the general population.²⁶⁰ A recent study found that 25 percent of essential workers were estimated to have low household income, with 13 percent in high-risk households.²⁶¹ The low pay of many essential workers makes them less able to cope with the financial consequences of the pandemic or their work-related health risks. As Americans return to work and governments relax certain rules, essential workers will continue to bear the brunt of the risk of maintaining the ongoing operation of vital facilities and services. The added health risk to essential workers is one prominent way in which the pandemic has amplified pre-existing socioeconomic inequities. Premium pay is designed to address the disparity between the critical services provided by and the risks taken by essential workers and the relatively low compensation they tend to receive.

The interim final rule established a three-part framework for recipients seeking to use SLFRF funds for premium pay. First, to receive premium pay one must be an eligible worker. Second, an eligible worker must also perform essential work. Finally, premium pay must respond to workers performing essential work during the COVID-19 public health emergency. Most of the comments received by Treasury pertaining to premium pay related to these three requirements. Comments also addressed the definition of premium pay generally and posed questions regarding premium pay program structuring. This section responds to the comments by

²⁵⁹ Economic Policy Institute, Only 30% of those working outside their home are receiving hazard pay (June 16, 2020), <https://www.epi.org/press/only-30-of-those-working-outside-their-home-are-receiving-hazard-pay-black-and-hispanic-workers-are-most-concerned-about-bringing-the-coronavirus-home/>.

²⁶⁰ McCormack, *supra* note 61.

²⁶¹ *Id.*

addressing the three requirements in turn, then the overall definition of premium pay and, finally, program structure.

Eligible Workers

The ARPA defines “eligible workers” as “those workers needed to maintain continuity of operations of essential critical infrastructure sectors and additional sectors as each . . . [government] may designate as critical to protect the health and wellbeing of [its] residents.” The interim final rule supplemented this definition by identifying a list of “essential critical infrastructure sectors” whose workers are eligible workers, based on the list of sectors in the HEROES Act, a bill introduced in the House of Representatives in 2020 that would have provided premium pay to essential workers.²⁶² In addition to the critical infrastructure sectors defined in the interim final rule, the chief executive (or equivalent) of a recipient government may designate additional non-public²⁶³ sectors as critical so long as doing so is necessary to protecting the health and wellbeing of the residents of such jurisdiction.

Public Comment: Treasury received multiple comments on the definition of “eligible worker” included in the interim final rule. Many commenters agreed with the definition of eligible worker adopted by Treasury. Other commenters sought clarification about or changes to the definition of eligible worker, including the definition of eligible sectors, the inclusion of government workers in the definition of eligible workers, and the process for designating additional non-public sectors as eligible.

²⁶² See H.R. 6800, 116th Cong. (2020).

²⁶³ Note that the sectors defined in the interim final rule already include all state, local, and Tribal government employees.

Some commenters asked Treasury to change how it identifies eligible sectors, including suggestions to add to or subtract from the list of eligible sectors. For example, some commenters asked Treasury to consider using Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)-Standard Occupational Classifications to identify specific sectors or occupations, in contrast to the approach taken in the interim final rule, which included a mixture of economic sectors, industries, and occupations. Many commenters asked Treasury to explicitly clarify that a particular industry or occupation is covered by the definition of "essential critical infrastructure sector." Some of these commenters represented public employees, e.g., employees of facilities and public works; public utilities; courthouse employees; police, fire, and emergency medical services; and waste and wastewater services. Others were a mixture of public and private sector employees, e.g., coroners and medical examiners; transportation infrastructure (specifically electric vehicle infrastructure and supply equipment); electric utilities, natural gas, and steam supply; and grocery employees. Other commenters requested that Treasury prohibit certain occupations currently included in the eligible workers definition (e.g., police and corrections officers) from receiving premium pay for performance of regular duties.

Commenters also asked Treasury to clarify which government workers are included in the definition of eligible workers. The interim final rule included as an essential critical infrastructure sector, "any work performed by an employee of a State, local, or Tribal government." Some commenters requested that Treasury adopt a definition of eligible worker that includes all employees of the recipient government; however, all public employees of state, local, and Tribal governments are already included in the interim final rule definition of "eligible worker." Commenters asked whether this includes governments that did not receive SLFRF funds (i.e., "non recipient governments"). Many commenters from Tribal governments requested

that the definition of eligible worker, which includes “any work performed by an employee of a . . . Tribal government,” also include an employee of a “Tribal enterprise” to remove uncertainty regarding which employees are included.

Finally, commenters made suggestions for the process by which the chief executive (or equivalent) of a recipient government may designate additional non-public sectors as critical. Commenters asked that Treasury adopt a requirement that Treasury must approve or deny any additional non-public sector identified by the chief executive of a recipient government prior to implementation of the recipient’s program.

Some commenters asked Treasury to clarify whether their chief executive (or equivalent) could designate particular, and in some cases *all*, employees of the recipient government as eligible for premium pay.

Treasury Response: In the final rule, Treasury will preserve the definition of “eligible worker” as it was defined in the interim final rule with minor modifications to clarify that all public employees of recipient governments are already included in the interim final rule definition of “eligible worker.” A more specific eligibility system (e.g., linking eligibility to specific occupational or industry codes) would have provided more certainty but would have been much more rigid. In contrast, the current definition is flexible enough to give recipients the ability to tailor their premium pay programs to meet their needs while ensuring that programs focus on sectors where workers were forced to shoulder substantial risk as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the critical infrastructure sectors defined in the interim final rule already include many of the occupations that commenters requested be added. For example, Treasury received many comments from public workers asking to be included in the definition of “eligible worker” even though these workers already fall within the scope of “any work

performed by an employee of a State, local, or Tribal government.” Treasury has clarified in the final rule that the chief executive’s discretion to designate additional sectors as critical relates only to “non-public” sectors, since all public employees of recipient governments are already included in the definition of “eligible worker.” While all such public employees are “eligible workers” and the chief executive (or equivalent) of a recipient government may designate additional non-public sectors as critical, in order to receive premium pay, these workers must still meet the other premium pay requirements (e.g., performing essential work).

Treasury recognizes that the list of “essential critical infrastructure sectors” includes both occupations and sectors. Recipients, if uncertain which occupations are included in a critical infrastructure sector, may consult government occupational classifications if helpful but are not required to do so.²⁶⁴ Furthermore, a recipient government does not need to submit to Treasury for approval its designation of a sector as essential critical infrastructure; rather, Treasury will defer to the reasonable interpretation of the recipient government and the discretion of the recipient’s chief executive in making such designations. If a recipient is unsure if a non-public sector is covered by the definition in the final rule,²⁶⁵ the chief executive (or equivalent) of a recipient government may also identify the non-public sector as critical so long as the chief executive deems the non-public sector necessary to protecting the health and wellbeing of residents.

Treasury has, where possible, clarified the definition of “essential critical infrastructure sectors.” For instance, Treasury has clarified in the final rule that work performed by an employee of a Tribal government includes an employee of a Tribal enterprise and discussed in this

²⁶⁴ See, e.g., sources such as Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook, which provide information on which professions or occupations are typically included in interpretations of a sector, <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/>.

²⁶⁵ Public sector workers are “eligible workers” under the interim final rule and final rule.

Supplementary Information how a recipient may qualify other non-public sectors as essential critical infrastructure.

Essential Work

The interim final rule defined “essential work” as work that (1) is not performed while teleworking from a residence and (2) involves either (i) regular, in-person interactions with patients, the public, or coworkers of the individual that is performing the work or (ii) regular physical handling of items that were handled by, or are to be handled by, patients, the public, or coworkers of the individual that is performing the work. Treasury adopted this definition of essential work to ensure that premium pay is targeted to workers that faced or face heightened risks due to the character of their work during a pandemic.

Public Comment: Some commenters found the definition unclear and asked Treasury to clarify what constitutes “essential work.” Others disagreed with the essential work test altogether, arguing that it forces recipients to distinguish between essential and non-essential employees, which may be difficult to do. Accordingly, these commenters asked Treasury to allow recipients to determine which workers qualify as essential. Treasury also received several requests that specific occupations be explicitly deemed essential, including all public employees, veterinarians, election administrators, detention staff and sheriff’s deputies, and employees of utilities, such as electric power, natural gas, steam supply, water supply, and sewage removal.

Several commenters requested that Treasury not distinguish between remote and in-person work or amend the standard so that employees providing essential services would still be eligible even if they worked remotely. Finally, a few commenters requested clarification as to the

definition of “regular” in-person interactions and whether Treasury could clarify which job functions merit more (or less) premium pay.

Treasury Response: Treasury is maintaining the definition of “essential work” in the final rule without modification. The test adopted in the interim final rule was designed to compensate workers facing disproportionate risk due to the pandemic. COVID-19 is transmitted through person-to-person interactions, and therefore, workers with regular in-person interactions are the primary group facing increased health risks. Although COVID-19 is not transmitted primarily by people handling items, such work may present increased risk in certain cases, and the final rule maintains the interim final rule’s inclusion of such work in order to give recipient governments the flexibility to include workers performing such work as they determine appropriate. Changing the test as some commenters suggested, e.g., by eliminating the in-person work requirement or allowing recipients to designate which employees are essential, even if not working in person, would no longer focus the program on workers taking on additional health risks and instead allow premium pay to be awarded to individuals who experienced relatively little risk of exposure to COVID-19. To maintain flexibility, Treasury is not defining the term “regular” with regard to in-person interactions, allowing recipients to develop programs based on the specific workforce to be served and local circumstances. Generally speaking, however, recipients are encouraged to consider an eligible worker’s risk of exposure in designing premium pay programs.

Respond To

As required by the ARPA, the interim final rule required that premium pay programs “respond to” eligible workers performing essential work during the COVID-19 public health

emergency. Premium pay responds to eligible workers performing essential work if it prioritizes low- and moderate-income persons, given the significant share of essential workers that are low- and moderate-income and may be least able to bear added costs associated with illness. The level of the award limit—up to \$13 per hour not to exceed \$25,000 in aggregate—in the ARPA supports this reasoning.

Accordingly, the interim final rule required written justification for how premium pay to certain higher-income workers responds to eligible workers performing essential work: if a recipient (or grantee) uses SLFRF funds to provide premium pay to an employee and the pay or grant would increase a worker's total pay above 150 percent of their residing state or county's average annual wage for all occupations, as defined by the BLS Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, whichever is higher, on an annual basis, then the recipient must provide, whether for themselves or on behalf of a grantee, written justification to Treasury detailing how the award responds to eligible workers performing essential work.

Public Comment: Treasury received numerous comments on the wage threshold and the written justification requirement. Several commenters supported the threshold as a way to encourage recipients to target premium pay to lower-income, eligible workers. Some commenters even asked Treasury to make the wage threshold a firm restriction, above which an eligible worker could not receive premium pay. Others agreed with the threshold but also requested flexibility to use existing worker classifications as an administratively simple way to identify workers for whom premium pay would be responsive. For instance, a few commenters asked Treasury to allow recipients or grantees to presume that premium pay “responds to” eligible workers performing essential work when it is provided to employees who are not exempt

from the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) overtime provisions — a test that employers are routinely required to apply.²⁶⁶

In contrast, several commenters disagreed with the threshold and the requirement for written justification. A few commenters thought the threshold was too low to capture employees in certain critical infrastructure sectors (e.g., public safety, waste collection) and that it did not sufficiently account for the variance in economic need across different geographic areas and family structures. Some smaller communities argued that the threshold was difficult to calculate and apply.

Other commenters proposed revisions for how the threshold is calculated. For instance, a few commenters asked Treasury to consider using alternative earnings measures such as median income. Similarly, another commenter asked Treasury to consider the incomes of workers with different levels of seniority in developing any income thresholds for permitting or reporting on premium pay.

Finally, there was also some uncertainty as to the threshold and the requirement for written justification. Some commenters interpreted the threshold as a hard cap on who was eligible for premium pay, which is not the case. Relatedly, some commenters also requested further guidance on what recipients should include in the written justification submitted to the Secretary.

Treasury Response: The final rule makes some modifications to the determination of when premium pay “responds to” eligible workers performing essential work during the public health emergency. Under the interim final rule, premium pay was responsive if either the workers’ pay was below a wage threshold or, if the pay was above a wage threshold, the

²⁶⁶ See generally 29 U.S.C. 207(a); U.S. Department of Labor, Overtime Pay Requirements of the FLSA (Fact Sheet No. 23), <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets/23-flsa-overtime-pay>.

recipient submitted written justification to Treasury explaining how the premium pay was responsive. The final rule retains these two means of establishing premium pay in response to workers performing essential work and adds an additional means of demonstrating that premium pay is responsive. Under the final rule, a recipient may also show that premium pay is responsive by demonstrating that the eligible worker receiving premium pay is not exempt from the FLSA overtime provisions.²⁶⁷ This change will expand the number of workers eligible to receive premium pay²⁶⁸ and does not require recipients to provide written justification to Treasury regarding the workers who are not exempt from the FLSA overtime provisions, making the program easier to administer for recipients. Incorporating this change further simplifies application of the final rule for recipients because Treasury understands that most employers, public and private, are familiar with and are routinely required to apply the FLSA.

With this addition, the final rule provides that premium pay is responsive to eligible workers performing essential work during the public health emergency if each eligible worker who receives premium pay falls into one of three categories: (1) the worker's pay is below the wage threshold, (2) the worker is not exempt from the FLSA overtime provisions, or (3) the recipient has submitted a written justification to Treasury.

²⁶⁷ Department of Labor, Overtime Pay, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/overtime>; *see also* 29 U.S.C. § 207.

²⁶⁸ Among workers that report working overtime, roughly 41–44 percent of workers earn above \$50,000 per year, which is slightly less than the national average annual wage for all employees according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, available at <https://www.bls.gov/oes/>. *See also* U.S. Census Bureau, Basic Monthly CPS, January 2019 through December 2019, available at <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/cps/cps-basic.html>. Notes: Annual earnings reflect weekly wages multiplied by 52. Usual weekly earnings are computed by BLS to include earnings from work such as tips, overtime, regular wages, etc., but not non-labor sources of income such as government transfers and capital gains. Pre-overtime earnings are computed by taking the difference of usual weekly earnings and earnings from overtime last week and multiplying by 52. Note, some sources multiply weekly earnings by 50 instead of 52 to account for unpaid time off and holidays, so these figures may be slightly larger than those reported elsewhere. Either assumption may overestimate earnings if workers do not work year-round.

The final rule makes it clear that written justification to Treasury is not necessary with respect to eligible workers whose pay is less than the wage threshold. Nor is written justification necessary with respect to eligible workers who are not exempt from the FLSA overtime provisions. The written justification is only necessary if the worker's pay (with or without the premium) exceeds the threshold, *and* the worker is exempt from the FLSA overtime provisions. The final rule also clarifies that a worker's pay exceeds the threshold if either the premium pay increases the worker's total pay above the wage threshold or the worker's total pay was already above the threshold, before receiving premium pay.

Treasury has also updated the final rule to clarify that written justification means a brief, written narrative justification of how the premium pay or grant is responsive to workers performing essential work during the public health emergency. This could include a description of the essential workers' duties, health or financial risks faced due to COVID-19, and why the recipient determined that the premium pay was responsive despite the workers' higher income.

Recipients should refer to SLFRF program reporting guidance, user guides, and other documentation for further guidance on the form and content of the written justification. Treasury anticipates that recipients will easily be able to satisfy the justification requirement for front-line workers, like nurses and hospital staff.

Definition of Premium Pay

The statute defines premium pay as “an amount of up to \$13 per hour . . . , in addition to wages or remuneration the eligible worker otherwise receives, for all work performed by the eligible worker during the COVID–19 public health emergency. Such amount may not exceed \$25,000 with respect to any single eligible worker.” The interim final rule incorporated this

definition and emphasized that premium pay should be in addition to compensation typically received.

Public Comment: Several submitted comments related to the definition of “premium pay.” Several commenters asked Treasury to clarify certain aspects of the interim final rule and statutory definition of premium pay. For instance, a few commenters asked whether the \$25,000 limit applies to the annual amount of premium pay received or the aggregate amount of premium pay received over the period of performance. A few commenters requested flexibility as to how premium pay may be awarded, including flexibility to make monthly or quarterly payments or lump sum payments. Finally, commenters requested additional clarification as to how premium pay should be calculated. For instance, a commenter asked how to calculate the amount of and account for overtime pay and other incentive pay.²⁶⁹

Treasury Response: Treasury has clarified some of these issues in the final rule. For example, Treasury has clarified in the final rule that the \$25,000 per employee limit is for the entire period of performance, not an annual cap. Further, recipients have discretion with respect to the way in which premium pay is awarded to eligible workers (e.g., monthly, quarterly, lump sum), provided that the total premium pay awarded to any eligible worker does not exceed \$13 per hour or \$25,000 over the period of performance. Finally, a recipient may award premium pay to an eligible worker in addition to the overtime pay already earned by the eligible worker but in no instance may the portion of the compensation funded with SLFRF funds exceed \$13 per hour, even if strict time-and-a-half calculation requires more.²⁷⁰ To the extent that an employer is

²⁶⁹ See 29 U.S.C. 207(a) (“[A]t a rate not less than one and one-half times the regular rate at which he is employed.”).

²⁷⁰ All recipients are required to comply with otherwise applicable laws, including any wage and hour requirements in the Fair Labor Standards Act. See generally, Department of Labor, *Wages and the Fair Labor Standards Act*, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/flsa>.

required under the FLSA to make payments to an eligible worker in excess of \$13 per hour or \$25,000 in the aggregate over the period of performance, the employer must use a source of funding other than the SLFRF funds to satisfy those obligations.

Program Structure

Public Comment: Several commenters also requested elaboration on eligible types of employees and permissible structures for awarding premium pay. A few commenters asked if premium pay could be awarded to volunteers or those in irregular and non-hourly or salaried employment positions. Similarly, various commenters asked if part-time workers were eligible for premium pay.

Some commenters asked Treasury to provide more detail on when premium pay may be paid retroactively or if a government could reimburse its general fund for hazard pay already paid before the start of the period of performance.

Treasury Response: Treasury has also made clear in the final rule that a recipient may award premium pay to non-hourly or salaried workers as well as part-time workers. Premium pay may not, however, be awarded to volunteers. If a recipient is interested in compensating volunteers with SLFRF funds, then it must do so consistent with the requirements set forth in other eligible use categories; for example, see section Public Sector Capacity and Workforce in Public Health and Negative Economic Impacts.

Under the final rule, recipients may award premium pay retroactively; however, SLFRF funds may not be used to reimburse a recipient or eligible employer grantee for premium pay or hazard pay already received by the employee. To make retroactive premium payments funded with SLFRF funds, a recipient or eligible employer grantee must make a new cash outlay for the

premium payments and the payments must be in addition to any wages or remuneration the eligible worker already received, subject to the other requirements and limitations set forth in the ARPA and this final rule.

Finally, as part of accepting the Award Terms and Conditions for SLFRF, each recipient agreed to maintain a conflict-of-interest policy consistent with 2 C.F.R. § 200.318(c) that is applicable to all activities funded with the SLFRF award. This award term requires recipients and subrecipients to report to Treasury or the pass-through agency, as appropriate, any potential conflict of interest related to the award funds per 2 C.F.R. § 200.112. Pursuant to this policy, decisions concerning SLFRF funds must be free of undisclosed personal or organizational conflicts of interest, both in fact and in appearance. Consistent with this policy, elected officials are prohibited from using their official position and control over SLFRF funds for their own private gain. This policy also prohibits, among other things, elected officials from steering funds to projects in which they have a financial interest or using funds to pay themselves premium pay.

C. REVENUE LOSS

Background

Sections 602(c)(1)(C) and 603(c)(1)(C) of the Social Security Act provide that SLFRF funds may be used “for the provision of government services to the extent of the reduction in revenue of such . . . government due to the COVID–19 public health emergency relative to revenues collected in the most recent full fiscal year of the . . . government prior to the emergency.” This provision allows recipients experiencing budget shortfalls to use payments from the SLFRF funds to avoid cuts to government services and, thus, enables state, local, and