

# Empowering The American Rescue Plan

Highlights from the July 27, 2021 Webinar

On March 11, 2021 President Biden signed into law one of the most significant pieces of legislation passed under his Administration so far, the \$1.9 trillion [American Rescue Plan Act of 2021](#). The Act was a substantive attempt to alleviate the economic and healthcare damage wrought by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It provided for, among other things, direct \$1,400 checks to most American households, \$130 billion in funding to help schools safely reopen, and \$360 billion in emergency funding for state, local, territorial, and tribal governments to help them bridge budget shortfalls resulting from plummeting revenues.

The American Rescue Plan has profound implications for agencies large and small, creating significant requirements to speed up America's recovery from the economic and health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to help agency leadership and staff understand what the American Rescue Plan means for them and their organizations, [ServiceNow](#) and The Advanced Technology Academic Research Center (ATARC) held a joint webinar on the topic featuring a panel of senior leaders from across the federal government: Jonathan Warsh, Senior Policy Advisor, Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) COVID-19 Response Team, Joshua Corman, Chief Strategist, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), and Anthony Orosz, Assistant Director, United States Customs & Border Protection (CBP).

The panel was moderated by Jonathan Alboum, Federal CTO & Principal Digital Strategist at ServiceNow, who himself has held a variety of senior executive positions in the federal government, including serving as the Chief Information Officer for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Panelists, with the active participation of panel attendees via a series of polls, discussed the ways in which their agencies' priorities have shifted in the year and a half since the COVID-19 pandemic was declared a national emergency, the shifting nature of work, and the opportunity to rebuild America's healthcare infrastructure in a way that is both more secure and more inclusive.

## Shifting Priorities to Confront New Challenges

Warsh explained that in the first quarter of 2021 HHS was heavily focused on ensuring that vaccines were available to the American people via as many distribution channels as possible. He noted that this work involved a great deal of coordination with state and local governments, pharmacies, community organizations, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which set up and ran numerous mass vaccination sites.

Warsh was quick to highlight that "state and local governments deserve a huge amount of the credit" for the country's successful vaccination program, noting that "the

vast majority of distribution programs are being run by local operations." In the past few months, as more and more Americans have become fully vaccinated, Warsh told panel attendees that his agency's focus has shifted to vaccine outreach and education in order to reach those Americans that have not yet been vaccinated.

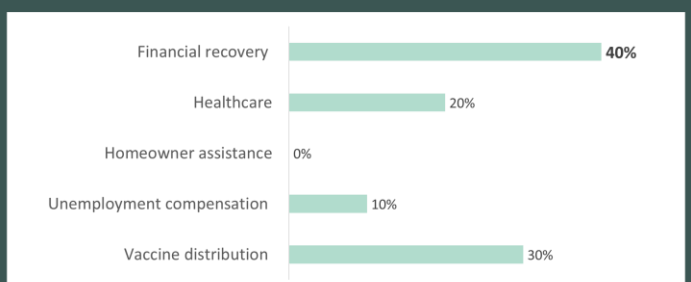
CISA's Joshua Corman highlighted a similar trajectory in his agency's priorities. During the early months of the pandemic, Corman shared that CISA was primarily focused on keeping hospitals and other healthcare providers open and functional in light of the substantial risk of ransomware and other cyber attacks. As America's vaccination program has progressed, CISA, like HHS, has become increasingly concerned with vaccine hesitancy. Corman noted that too many Americans have yet to be vaccinated due to the spread of misinformation and disinformation concerning the vaccine.

*"We're proud of our partnerships with private industry."*

Anthony Orosz, CBP

Rounding out the picture, Orosz reminded panel attendees that at the beginning of the pandemic there was a great deal of urgency in acquiring sufficient quantities of PPE. CBP played its part in combating the shortage by setting up policies and procedures to facilitate the frictionless transfer of PPE into the United States. Once the first vaccinations were developed overseas, CBP played a critical role in partnering with the pharmaceutical industry to get them into the United States as quickly as possible.

Webinar Audience Poll: What is the most important part of the American Rescue Plan?



The responses of panel attendees aligned with the priorities shared by Warsh, Corman, and Orosz. 90% of responses saw financial recovery, vaccine distribution, and healthcare as the most important parts of the American Rescue Plan.

## The Future of Work

Panelists also discussed the profound changes in federal work environments caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. There was widespread agreement that things would not go back to the way they were before the pandemic and

that hybrid work environments are the future. Warsh noted that while many of his colleagues at HHS would welcome the opportunity for greater in-person interaction, many others, particularly those with young children, found that they are more productive when working remotely.

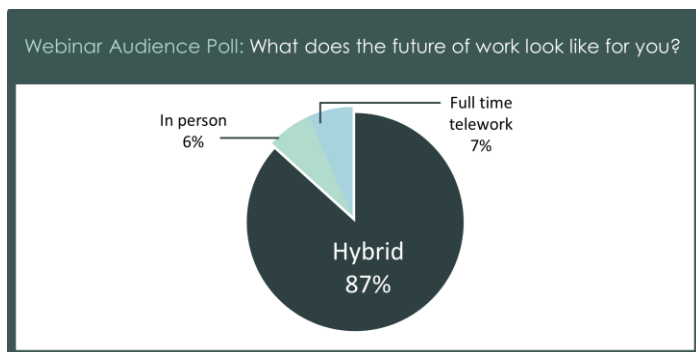
*“We can now take subject matter experts for each individual commodity from across the entire country and put them on the same team, which is absolutely amazing.”*

Anthony Orosz, CBP

Warsh’s fellow panelists chimed in to highlight some of the opportunities and challenges associated with the decline of full-time in-person work. Orosz argued that hybrid work environments would allow federal agencies, including CBP, to recruit from a far wider pool of candidates. Where he was once limited to finding staff in the area of greater New York City, Orosz could now consider new hires from across the country.

In response, Warsh noted that he had encountered similar challenges as a state official in Michigan, where it was often difficult to find staff willing to relocate or commute to the state capital of Lansing. However, coming from a cybersecurity perspective, Corman noted that remote and hybrid work environments came with their own security challenges in the form of an expanded attack surface. He added that much of the infrastructure for remote work was set up in a hurry, without the usual standards of care, out of necessity. That infrastructure will need to be more thoroughly vetted and secured in the future.

Panel attendees overwhelmingly endorsed the prognosis of Warsh, Corman, and Orosz, with 87% of participants anticipating a hybrid work environment, compared with just seven and six percent anticipating full-time telework and full-time in-person work, respectively.



### Build Back Better

One of the guiding principles of the Biden Administration has been Build Back Better, the notion that America should strive to not only recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic but also to rebuild her economic system in a

more inclusive manner. This sentiment was widely shared among panel participants who argued that the pandemic provided an opportunity to address both economic inequities and the vulnerability of America’s critical infrastructure.

Corman noted that organizations have a tendency to want to “go back to normal” after a period of disruption but cautioned that the old approach may not be the best one. By way of example, Corman passionately argued that the degree to which many components of America’s critical infrastructure continue to rely on unsupported software that has reached end of life represents a serious vulnerability.

Corman also explained how CISA has changed its approach to evaluating the impact of ransomware and other cyberattacks. Where the agency previously evaluated breaches in terms of records lost or reduced revenues, it now considers the impact in terms of excess deaths resulting from delayed patient care. This change in approach has resulted in a greater urgency among Members of Congress to address the vulnerabilities of the thousands of hospitals and healthcare providers across the country, many of which possess few, if any, cybersecurity resources.

*“It will take [our healthcare system] easily five years to get to ‘full fighting strength’ again even once the pandemic is over.”*

Joshua Corman, CISA

Beyond cybersecurity, Marsh added that the COVID-19 pandemic had exposed significant gaps in healthcare equity, with communities of color suffering from lower levels of access to healthcare and higher mortality rates. Marsh argued that the pandemic revealed the need for “structural, generational” investments in order to close those gaps in the future.

Audience participants resonated particularly strongly with Corman’s call for enhanced cybersecurity, with 67% of attendees agreeing that future allocation of funds from the American Rescue Plan should emphasize protecting cyberspace.

