



Telephone Town Hall, April 21, 2021 *Transcript*

Nora Walsh-DeVries:

Good evening, everybody. Thank you so much for joining us at our town hall with Congresswoman Katie Porter. My name is Nora Walsh-DeVries, and I am the District Director here. We are going to go ahead and get started in just a couple of minutes. We're giving people a couple of minutes to hop on, but just for everyone's awareness, if you would like to ask a question tonight, please dial star three. And you will be connected and hopefully, we'll be able to get to a whole bunch of questions tonight. So again, if you have a question, dial star three. And again, this is a town hall with Congresswoman Katie Porter, and we will get started in just a few moments.

Nora Walsh-DeVries:

Okay, everybody again, you are joining the town hall with Congresswoman Katie Porter. If you have a question, please dial star three. Without further ado, I'm going to kick it over to the Congresswoman to get us started.

Congresswoman Porter:

Hello, everybody. This is Congresswoman Katie Porter. Welcome to our first telephone town hall, but our fourth virtual town hall of the year. This is probably about our fourth telephone town hall since we started doing them.

Congresswoman Porter:

My staff will tell you that hosting town halls is definitely one of my favorite parts of the job. Getting to be in conversation with the people in our community, to listen to you, to learn from you, to give you updates on what's happening in Washington. I really miss getting to do these in-person before COVID, but I'm hopeful, still hopeful, that we're nearing the end of the pandemic and we can have safe public gatherings again. I hope to see you all in person soon.

Congresswoman Porter:

Fundamentally, town halls are about learning and teaching. I want to learn directly from you about what matters to you and your family. And hopefully I'm able to share information or teach you something new about what's happening in Congress. And you could walk away, have a little bit better understanding of our government and what we're trying to do than you did before. Many of you know that I was a professor before I ran for Congress. So, I could talk all night. But I want to dedicate most of this event to listening to your questions and concerns and priorities. So, the plan is to spend a couple of minutes sharing what I've been up to during this new Congress that started in January so far. And then to reserve the rest of the hour hearing from you and answering your questions.

Congresswoman Porter:

My top priority in the beginning of this term has been working to make sure that our community gets the help that it needs to get through this pandemic. And I know this past year has been really hard on all of us. I'm a single mom with three kids in our public schools. Like many of you, I've had to navigate, keeping my kids home all day during remote learning,

returning to part-time, in-person instruction, juggling their different schedules. When I'm not dealing with my kids photobombing my congressional Hearings—yes, that really happened to me yesterday—I've been fighting for policies to bring help to middle class families.

Congresswoman Porter:

And I want to highlight some of the most important provisions of the American Rescue Plan, which I voted for and which was signed into law earlier this year. First, we talk about money in pockets, the \$1,400 survival checks that people will get and have already gotten in most cases to keep food on the table. About 85% of families nationwide will get these checks or have already gotten them. The pandemic has been really hard for people with children and the rising cost of childcare was a problem long before the pandemic. We expanded the child tax credit from \$3,000 to \$3,600 for every child under six years old. Unemployment Insurance has been supplemented by \$300 a week through early September. We focused on getting shots into arms. We put \$20 billion dollars towards getting vaccines distributed. This is really the key step to ending this pandemic. And we're working on getting kids back in school. And so, it allocates billions of dollars toward reopening our schools and helping to meet our kids' needs after what's been a really difficult year.

Congresswoman Porter:

One of the provisions that I worked on, particularly as a member of the House Oversight Committee, is funding for our state and local governments. They have really been leading both the public health efforts and also the efforts to deliver help in our communities, whether it's programs like Meals on Wheels or rental assistance. Nationwide, state and local governments got \$350 billion to help close the budget gaps caused by the pandemic. \$43 billion of that is coming to us here in California. I recently had a town hall with Mayor Leticia Clark and state senator Dave Min to talk about what the state and local governments are doing with this money and what they're using it to do to make a difference in people's lives.

Congresswoman Porter:

Being a Congressman wasn't the first job where I've been a single, working mom, and I know all too well that we don't just want to get back to "normal." It's not good enough for working parents. And that's why as the President talks about building back better, I've been working with colleagues to make sure that we keep the expanded child tax credit in place, even after the pandemic is over. I'm working to strengthen that tax credit by eliminating a penalty that is in it currently that makes it harder for kids living in households headed by single parents to get help, makes it harder for those kids, who are less likely to qualify for the tax credit. It can mean that kids in single parent families get less nutritious food, less opportunity for quality housing, less quality childcare than kids living in households with married parents.

Congresswoman Porter:

Big excitement for me this Congress has been that I joined a new committee. I joined the Natural Resources Committee and I'm thrilled to have been selected by my peers to chair the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations. And we are so blessed in Orange County to have beautiful public lands. And I'm doing my part to protect our collective natural treasures for years to come. I've gotten to work holding polluters accountable. That included confronting a Big Oil executive about the special tax breaks, the subsidies, that fossil fuel companies get. I introduced the *Ending Taxpayer Welfare for Oil and Gas Companies Act*, which would raise royalties and rental rates and inspection fees on oil and gas companies that extract resources from our public lands. And this legislation protects taxpayers by charging a

fair price to polluters. We have been charging oil and gas companies the same royalty rate for over 100 years. And so, this legislation would update those prices and make sure that we're getting a fair return on what oil and gas companies are taking from our public lands.

Congresswoman Porter:

I'm also working on creating a justice system that respects and helps all individuals and keeps them safe from police violence. About one in four fatal police encounters end the life of an individual with severe mental illness. I introduced the *Mental Health Justice Act* to reduce violence against individuals with mental illness and disabilities and take some of the burden off our law enforcement of trying to respond to these calls. The *Mental Health Justice Act* would make it easier for local government to send trained mental health professionals instead of police when there's a 911 call for an individual experiencing a mental health crisis. And our police officers have told me they don't want to be doing this. They're not psychologists or social workers, and they're definitely not psychiatrists. That's not their job. So, if our goal here is to safely de-escalate a situation and get someone the health care that they need, then we should let that work be done in the hands of mental health professionals.

Congresswoman Porter:

So far in the 117th Congress, I've also been continuing the work I've been doing on cracking down on the influence of dark money in politics, protecting the right to vote, reducing gun violence, protecting survivors of domestic violence, supporting equal pay for equal work, and just today, making sure that no U.S. president can ever impose a Muslim ban, or a similar kind of ban against people because of their religion. That is a violation of our values. We should never allow it to happen again.

Congresswoman Porter:

I want to stop myself there. But we've been very, very busy. I'm happy to talk about any of the things I mentioned. So, I'm going to go ahead and start the question-and-answer portion of the town hall. If you want to ask your question, you dial star three. And we already have had a few questions come in. So let me start with the first question.

Congresswoman Porter:

We had a constituent from Irvine who asked, "Can you please discuss your position regarding repealing the SALT tax deduction cap?"

Congresswoman Porter:

So, I'm a champion for tax fairness. And that is really about leveling the playing field across states for federal taxes. What you owe shouldn't depend on the state that you live in. The SALT deduction, which stands for "state and local tax deduction," is based on the simple notion that people shouldn't be taxed at the federal level on the money that they're using to pay their state and local taxes. If you tax that money, it's double taxation. And it's wrong and it's unfair. And the state and local tax deduction allows local governments to invest in local priorities like schools and roads. And this state local tax deduction is so common sense that it was part of our U.S. tax code ever since it was established in 1913. But along came President Trump and his tax law and what he did is pass a cap on state and local taxes of \$10,000. And this is your state income tax, your local property taxes. And that \$10,000 cap on the amount that you can deduct is not doubled for married people. So, there's a marriage penalty. It's not adjusted for house prices, places where we have more expensive property. And President Trump, frankly, was very clear about his purpose, which was to punish blue states, punish states that had not supported him, including California.

Congresswoman Porter:

So, what am I doing about this? I'm leading a letter with my colleagues, Mike Levin, who represents the area here in South Orange County, and Josh Harder. We led a letter to President Biden to urge him to reverse the SALT cap deduction to remove that limit of \$10,000, so that families can deduct whatever they're paying in state and local taxes from their federal taxes. We invited the full California congressional delegation to join us in that letter, and every single Democrat signed on. And so, we're moving ahead with this. We're asking the President to make this a priority. We're working with our colleagues in other states where the SALT tax deduction is really hurting families. And I think it's important to remember that what our state and local governments do is so important, and the pandemic has really reinforced that, whether it's public health efforts on testing and vaccines, or making sure that we're funding our schools and our teachers and our first responders. So, I am 100% committed to restoring that state and local tax deduction, so that taxpayers and our local communities can invest in their priority.

Congresswoman Porter:

Okay, the second question I have a constituent from Irvine asked, "What are you able to do at the federal level to help protect your constituents from the recent surge in anti-Asian hate crimes?"

Congresswoman Porter:

It's so important that we stop hateful acts and crimes toward those in our community. And I backed the *COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act*, which would direct the Department of Justice to expedite the review of hate crimes against the AAPI community, and it would provide support to our local law enforcement to respond to these crimes. And in light of rising hate crimes, I've also worked on bipartisan legislation with Congresswoman Grace Meng to investigate hate crimes. And I introduced a bipartisan resolution with Congresswoman Steele to condemn acts of bigotry.

Congresswoman Porter:

We've been doing work in the district here as well. We recently held a virtual town hall about AAPI hate crimes with Orange County Human Relations, where we talked about what is a hate crime, and how they occur in our community, and what we can all do to help make Orange County a safer place for everyone.

Congresswoman Porter:

And the last thing I would say is that we're working on making sure that we're reporting, tracking, and prosecuting these hate crimes. And so, it's really, really important that we're treating these as what they are, which is criminal acts that make us all less safe and less welcome here in our own communities.

Nora Walsh-DeVries:

Awesome. Thank you so much, Congresswoman. We are going to take a couple of questions from our participants tonight. So, we have a question about corruption from Dr. Jackson. Dr. Jackson, you are now live. Dr. Jackson, are you on the line?

Dr. Jackson:

Hello. Yes, I am.

Nora Walsh-DeVries:

Amazing. Go ahead and ask your question.

Dr. Jackson:

Okay. My question is the following: Katie, do you make a distinction between legal and illegal corruption? And if so, how does your legislation address legal corruption?

Congresswoman Porter:

Well, we definitely need to make sure that the American people have trust and confidence in our government. And the reality is that confidence in Congress, and in government in general is at an all-time low, and I am really determined to help change that. And so, I've been working on issues like making sure that we have transparency in government. And that's been everything from taking actions at our own office to model that kind of good governance, like we disclose each month who I've been meeting with so you can see how I'm using my time and who we're talking to. And it's things like my commitment not to take corporate PAC money and not to take money from those who are lobbyists. And under current laws, you know, those are legal.

Congresswoman Porter:

And so, you're absolutely right that we need to change some of the laws, as well as change some of the norms to tackle this problem of corruption. And we've introduced H.R. 1, the *For the People Act*, which would help to do that. But when we talk about ending corruption, it's really about protecting our democracy. And so, a big part of that is getting dark money out of politics. It's making sure we're holding government officials to high standards. So, for example, I've been leading on the *Stock Act 2.0*, a bill that would prohibit members of Congress from trading individual stocks and engaging in that kind of self-dealing. And I've also founded a caucus called the End Corruption Caucus with my colleague, Jason Crow, from Colorado. And so, continuing to do a lot to make sure that we're cracking down both on existing rules, but really, as you point out, the bigger problem is needing to change the rules so that the people can have confidence in what their elected representatives are doing. And I'm going to keep holding myself to a high standard on that.

Nora Walsh-DeVries:

Awesome. We have another question here from Mary Lou. Mary Lou, you should be live.

Mary Lou:

Oh, my heavens. Okay. My question is, I am really appalled at the amount of shootings we are having weekly, if not daily, practically, and wondering what you think the possibility of Congress doing anything about banning assault weapons or more gun control?

Congresswoman Porter:

Yeah, thank you so much. And you're absolutely right that we have a gun violence epidemic in this country. And I think it's important even in the middle of COVID-19, and particularly as we, we come out of that, I think the number of gun violence incidents are a reminder of what a problem we have. And there are things that Congress can do and has started to do, and we need to keep doing them until we've actually changed things on the ground.

Congresswoman Porter:

So, the House has already this year passed bipartisan legislation to institute universal background checks, and close what is known as the Charleston Loophole. And the Charleston

Loophole refers to the shooting that occurred in Charleston. And what happened there is somebody applied for a purchase permit for a lethal weapon. And the current rule says if you don't hear back in a few days, you're deemed approved. And in fact, a lot of people who are then deemed approved actually are not lawfully able to purchase that weapon., so it closes that loophole. Neither of those bills have been taken up yet in the Senate. And so we have to push the Senate to take action, so that we can put a bill in front of President Biden to help deal with gun violence.

Congresswoman Porter:

One of the issues I've worked on, and I started this work last Congress, was requiring a report back to Congress on the effect of firearm possession with regard to domestic violence. And I want to make sure that Congress has the information we need to make any helpful changes to the background check system to protect vulnerable people.

Congresswoman Porter:

Another big part of this is investing in public health research to find innovative solutions. This is everything from empowering the Centers for Disease Control and National Institutes of Health to do this research, to focusing on things like making sure that we're providing incentives under the tax code for gun owners to purchase equipment to store their firearms safely and prevent family fire. So, I'm absolutely committed to this issue and feel very fortunate to have wonderful partners here at the local level with Brady, Moms Demand, and other groups that are working to educate people on the importance of preventing gun violence.

Nora Walsh-DeVries:

Awesome. We have another question here from Lori DeCarlo. Lori, you should be live.

Lori:

Oh, thank you very much. Good evening, Congresswoman. My concern is, and there's I think it's an overarching concern, is that there is a tremendous amount of divisiveness and vitriol in our government today. And, you know, these things that you speak of and these other issues that many of us are concerned about, homelessness, rampant drug abuse, what's happening at the border, law enforcement, those things cannot truly be addressed until our representatives are working together, regardless of party affiliation, in our homes, in our schools, in our communities, we all work together, regardless of our ideology, and I just don't see that happening. And, you know, in your responses to me, it contains some of that partisan language. My question is, what can you do specifically to take partisan out of it and begin working to address some of these issues for representatives regardless of ideology? Thank you.

Congresswoman Porter:

Yeah, thank you so much for your question. And one of the things I hope you noticed in this chance to have this conversation so far, is I actually haven't talked about the political parties at all. I'm talking about what Congress has been able to do, and I'm trying to flag that a lot of what we've been working on is in fact, bipartisan. And I think there's a real gap between that reality and kind of how things get presented, and not only on TV, but you're right, this is something that we all have to be thoughtful about, whether we're engaging with our families, or we're engaging with our voters and our constituents.

Congresswoman Porter:

I think President Biden has set a very good tone, right from his campaign right into the White House, making clear that we have important challenges. We have problems in this country, and we have solutions. And we need to be pushing toward those solutions. And we very much hope that everybody, every representative will investigate these problems, will think about the issues with gun violence prevention, with immigration, with the price of prescription drugs, with the need to invest in infrastructure, and then that every representative regardless of their party, or what part of the country they represent, will come to the table willing to work on a solution, and that should be how we approach every single issue.

Congresswoman Porter:

I will tell you, personally, that I have generally been able to find Republican co-sponsors for my bills. I have a bill called the *Family Savings for Kids and Seniors Act*, where my co-sponsor is Republican Jamie Herrera-Butler, also a fellow mom of three that would let family set aside more money pre-tax to pay for childcare. I have a Republican sponsor on my bill to crackdown on scam political operations that fleece people out of money who just want to participate in our democracy and my co-lead on that is Representative Dan Crenshaw, a Republican from Texas. And I don't agree with Dan on everything, but this is a real problem. And if Dan wants to help solve it, then I want that partnership. And so, I think we need to be saying to each other in Congress, just like we're saying to each other in our communities, "This is my priority. This is my value. Do you want to work on this together?" And then give each other the space to have the discussion and the debate to figure out the best solution.

Nora Walsh-DeVries:

Awesome and again, for those of us who are just joining us, this is a town hall with Congresswoman Katie Porter. If you have a question, you can still dial star three and we will try to get to it but right now we are going to take a question from Barbara. I think there are a couple of Barbaras on here. So, Barbara, who has a question about Social Security, I will bring you live.

Barbara from Mission Viejo:

Hi, this is Barbara and I live in Mission Viejo. Hi Katie.

Congresswoman Porter:

Hello. How are you, Barbara?

Barbara from Mission Viejo:

I'm good. My question is regarding the taxability of Social Security. It's a real pet peeve of mine. And at this time of the year, particularly, I see it affecting more than just me, because I volunteer for tax aid. And I see it with my clients. But the money that we get from Social Security, half of it was first taken out of our check as a tax. Half of it was put there by our employers as a tax and as money that they would not, would not pay us because they were paying the government. So, why is it that the government can tax 85% of it, which this year put us in an entirely different tax bracket? It really hurt.

Congresswoman Porter:

Absolutely. Social Security, as you know, is a real lifeline for people and it is one of our most successful government programs. And it has worked to help lift millions of seniors out of poverty, help them lead lives with dignity, and be able to take care of each other in their lives, even as Californians are living longer and healthier lives. So, we absolutely need to

make sure that those Social Security benefits are of a size that they're enough for people to live on, including in higher cost living areas like this, but also make sure that we're not taxing those Social Security benefits in a way that erodes that.

Congresswoman Porter:

And I know that for a lot of people, for most people, Social Security is not enough to live on. It doesn't meet their needs, and they have to supplement with other retirement savings. And that's partly by design of the program, but we also need to make sure that we're protecting Social Security and expanding it. And I think part of that can involve discussion about what the right level of taxation is, if any, on Social Security, and part of it can make sure that we're making that investment in Social Security. And I think it's really important to state one fundamental fact: Social Security adds zero to our deficit. Zero. And the program is in good shape for the next several years. And the changes that we need to make to make Social Security stable, to continue to allow it to work well, are changes that are common sense changes that we've been committed to for a long time.

Congresswoman Porter:

And so, I absolutely appreciate you raising that issue about the taxability, and I think one of the things that we could also work on is that SALT deduction that I mentioned, making sure that our seniors can deduct their property tax, that will also be helpful in making sure that our seniors don't wind up in a high tax bracket.

Nora Walsh-DeVries:

Awesome. Thank you. We are going to go to Carol who has a question about consumer protection. Carol, you are live.

Carol:

Okay. Hi, Katie. I'm calling because there's something that I think is fairly bipartisan, and that's protecting consumers better from data breaches, like the Cillian Breach that hit 100 institutions, including UC and hundreds of thousands of people. What I'm wondering is what can be done with legislation or regulation to shift the incentives for the people who hold data, maybe change the way Social Security is being used as a universal identifier? You know, what can be done to change the changes systematically, instead of the burden just being on individuals to go change their passwords and monitor their information?

Congresswoman Porter:

This is a terrific question. Really glad you're focusing on this. And this is an area where we need to step up in Congress. We are lagging behind in making the kinds of laws, both to prevent data breaches, but also to deal with them when they occur, but the American public and the American business community need to continue to be successful.

Congresswoman Porter:

So, I began my work on this issue when I questioned the CEO of Equifax, asking him about the data breach that had occurred there. And when I asked him if he would give the Committee he was testifying before Congress, and would he please state for the committee, his date of birth, and his Social Security number, and his home address, and he explained that that was private information, and it would be really damaging if it was revealed. But in fact, at that very same time, Equifax was in federal court arguing that they shouldn't be responsible for data breaches, even though they were told time and again that they were very, very high risk

of a data breach.

Congresswoman Porter:

So, one of the things we need to do is create a clear set of rules for those who gather data, like companies, employers, retailers, what do they need to do to protect data to make it safe? What does that look like? What kinds of protections do they need to have? And then second, when there is a breach because they will occur--they're an increasing problem--then what are we going to do to help make it right? And your point that we put the responsibility of dealing with this mess on consumers, and there's nothing that any one of us can do to make sure that a company that we're dealing with has adequate security, has protected their servers, is updating their software. And so, we need a clear set of guidelines, and the vast majority of responsible businesses want those guidelines so that they know what they need to be doing to earn their customers trust.

Congresswoman Porter:

And so, we've been working on getting national data breach law in Congress, one of the things that we are drawing on is what California has been doing with regard to data privacy and trying to come up with a with a national standard. But frankly, you know, this is an area that I think really illustrates one of my, frankly, one of my frustrations with Congress, which is that sometimes I feel like Congress's motto is "solving yesterday's problems tomorrow, maybe." And data breaches have been a problem. They were a problem yesterday, they were a problem last year, and they're going to keep being a problem. Congress shouldn't wait. We should come together and create a clear set of rules for businesses that help take some of that burden off consumers of dealing with the exposure of their personal information.

Nora Walsh-DeVries:

Awesome. Thank you, Congresswoman. We are going to go to Lenore Rabinowitz, who has a question about H.R. 1. Lenore, you are live.

Lenore:

Hi, Congresswoman. I am concerned that H.R. 1 won't get passed. What is happening with it? Is Mitch McConnell succeeding in killing it? You know, I want my friends in the South to be able to vote. Let's put it that way.

Congresswoman Porter:

Yes, absolutely. Thank you so much for your question. So, here's the good news. The House passed H.R. 1 last Congress. We passed it again this Congress. It's the *For the People Act*. And this is one of the top priorities that motivated me to run for Congress, which is standing up to powerful special interests, making sure that we're reducing the influence of dark money in politics, and we're protecting people's right to vote. And those are really the three aspects of H.R. 1, the *For the People Act*. And so that bill passed Congress.

Congresswoman Porter:

You're absolutely right, that it has gone over to the Senate, where it's been named Senate Bill 1. And it is sitting there waiting, waiting, waiting for it to be passed. And they are working very hard to try to figure out, are they going to be able to get enough Republicans? Or you know, enough to get it passed? Will the Republicans filibuster the bill? Or will they let it pass on the simple majority? And so, we're going to be having an upcoming town hall to talk about the filibuster. I think it's going to be the week of May 2nd. And so, we'll be talking more

about, what is the filibuster and how does it keep our Senate from doing the work that the Constitution intends.

Congresswoman Porter:

But right now, we're in a position where they're continuing to negotiate. They're trying to make sure that they're going to have the votes to bring it to the floor. And you're absolutely right that this is must pass legislation to protect our democracy.

Congresswoman Porter:

I want to flag a related bill. You mentioned protecting people's rights to vote. There's a lot of that in H.R. 1, but also, we have another bill that honors former Congressman John Lewis, who passed away recently, a civil rights legend. It protects the right to vote. And we really need to establish as a matter of protecting our nation, the baseline protections for voting across this country, which shouldn't vary depending on where you live. And so that bill is also very, very important and we're working to figure out how we can get both of them across the finish line. And if that means reforming the filibuster, then that's what I support doing.

Nora Walsh-DeVries:

Awesome. We are going to take a question from Vera. Vera, you are live.

Vera:

Wow. Well, thank you, Katie, for your efforts, first of all, but I'd like to know what you have is a plan in the future for our children, all the way from pre-K, primary, middle and high school, in the sense of how we're going to face a higher level of education when we have higher and different levels of difficulties to face in our future, not only to the United States, but in the planet, we have to compete. We have a lot of competition internationally; we have a lot of needs on the local basis. And our level of education doesn't seem to be going up to par. Do you have anything planned in there because we need to understand the data we are making, the data we are receiving, the slew of data that children are forced to maneuver since a young age. And when we make decisions politically, socially, and economically, I think education is a serious matter. Any plans on that?

Congresswoman Porter:

Absolutely. Thank you very much for your question, Veera. And we have to think and talk about education as what it is, which is an investment in our economy and in our society. It's critical both to our democracy and to our capitalist economy that we have students who are receiving an education that's going to put them on if not a competitive advantage, at least a level playing field with our global competitors. And so that means investing in early childhood education, including holding President Biden to his commitment of creating universal pre-K, going all the way through making sure that we're doing the educational work in elementary schools, middle schools and high schools.

Congresswoman Porter:

I have three kids in Irvine public schools. And so, I see and think about a lot, what skills are they getting. And one of the things that's obviously a concern is that the pandemic, and the fact that our schools in California have been closed for a long time, have been remote, have been hybrid, is there's a real problem with people falling behind and with educational gaps and with learning recovery. So, one of the things I did was send a letter to the new Secretary of Education, asking for him to please provide a plan for us on what they're going to do to be able to address these learning gaps, and learning recovery created by the pandemic. And so

that is really, really an important part of this, including making sure that those with learning differences and those who are subject to and part of special education programs are getting the resources that they need, making sure that every student can achieve at their ability.

Congresswoman Porter:

And as a professor, I will tell you, I was part of the UC system. I do a lot of work with our community colleges here in the district. And we have to continue to work to make sure that every student who is dedicated and hardworking and talented enough to begin a college education actually is able to get that degree and go to work in a good high paying job. And that means we're going to have to continue to make additional spots at the UC system, and to make sure that education debt isn't overwhelming families and students. So, we formed a College Affordability Caucus, we're having actually one of our first meetings tomorrow to talk about what we can do not just to address the problems of education debt, but also to make sure college is affordable in the first place. So that instead of telling families, you've got to save more, you're going to save more, we're keeping that cost of tuition at a place where education can be available to every student who wants to get it and is willing to do the work and thrive and succeed. And this is something we need to talk about, both in terms of social opportunity, but also in terms of global competition and building the kind of economy we're going to need to compete worldwide. So, I really appreciate you, Vera, taking that international perspective and encouraging us to make the level of investment we need in education.

Nora Walsh-DeVries:

Awesome. Thank you, Congresswoman. We are going to go over to Sean, who has a question on mental health. Sean, you are live.

Sean:

Hi Katie, I commend you and your office and the work that you're doing. I'm hoping that maybe you can help me with this. My son, well not just my son, all people that have mental health. My son has been suffering with schizophrenia for 10 years. I'm 67. So, I don't think I'm going to be here the rest of his life. And the mental health people, if they're on disability, cause I'm retired. They're swept aside because we take him to the county here. And the people that work in the mental department there, the psychiatrists and therapists, and I know they mean well, but they're really the bottom of the barrel. It's understandable that somebody that has a better degree or works better with them is not going to work for the county. But that's just what they are. And three years ago, my son was arrested for six months in LA County. And they didn't help him or anything. They just locked him in a tank. And they put on that thing—

Congresswoman Porter:

Sean, let me let me stop you there, because I want to say something really important to you, to your son, and to everybody who's listening, which is that I want to thank you for speaking up about the mental health care that your family needs and raising these issues, describing the problems that your family has had in getting the right kind of health care, finding qualified providers, being able to take care of people and their mental health needs throughout their lives. This is a huge, huge challenge for this country. And it is one of my very top priorities in Congress. And so, I want to take a couple of minutes to just run through some of the things that I've begun to do on this, but mental health is going to continue to be something that I work really, really hard to help Americans address.

Congresswoman Porter:

So, I passed a bill. It was signed into law that would require insurance companies to cover mental health in the same way that they cover physical health. And that has actually been the law since the *Affordable Care Act* was passed. But as you describe, Sean, in your story, when you go out and try to find those health care providers and you try to use the insurance that you have, or the coverage that you have, there are shortages of trained providers. There are limited networks. Nobody's taking new patients. Nobody takes your insurance. If you go to the hospital in mental health crisis, people in a mental health crisis often spend the entire time that they are there in the emergency room, rather than receiving the critical health care services that they need. So, this involves everything from making sure insurance companies are following the law and enforcing what we call mental health parity, which means covering mental health and physical health at the same level with the same kinds of networks, the same high quality health care providers.

Congresswoman Porter:

It also means recognizing that the pandemic has only worsened the needs of our country with regard to mental and behavioral health. This is everything from grief for those who have lost a loved one during COVID, to isolation for seniors and kids. So, I have a bill called the *Stopping the Mental Health Pandemic Act*, which would provide resources to state and local governments, counties. You mentioned feeling like the provider at the county wasn't enough and wasn't of a quality you need. And so, the *Stopping the Mental Health Pandemic Act* would help with that. And so mental health is really, really important. There's a lot of work to be done. And we're really doing that hard work in Congress.

Nora Walsh-DeVries:

Awesome. Thank you so much. We probably only have time for about one or two more questions, but we are going to go over to Kimberly in Irvine. And Kimberly, you should be live.

Peter in Irvine:

Hi, this is Peter. Kim and I are sharing this phone. Congresswoman Porter, thank you for taking this. I gotta say I'm extremely dazzled by the number of, and the breadth of concerns people are expressing. But I'll be real quick. I have a sort of concern with building better bigger and some political problems. We have a local construction project that has been ongoing, is six months delayed. And I'm wondering within funds that might come federally— I've actually talked to Senator Min's office—are there any strings or anything that you guys can put into building better bigger to make sure that funds get used appropriately and in a timely manner?

Congresswoman Porter:

Yes, so thank you for your question. And as we think about this infrastructure investment that we're going to make, we need to not just think about what we're going to say in a press conference. We need to think about what's going to happen in real people's lives. And that means making sure that infrastructure projects are well designed, are able to be executed in a responsible way. So that means making sure that we're really getting the projects out, and we're getting them completed, so that people are not just hearing about the bridges, or the roads, or the retrofitting of buildings for energy, or the improvements to our aging VA hospitals, but they're actually seeing that work get done. And so, we'd be happy to learn more about what's going on. If you would follow up with our office, we'd be delighted to hear more about your story because hearing these kinds of these kinds of challenges and situations really reminds me of something that I often say and I really saw as a consumer advocate, which is

that it doesn't really matter what the law says on paper. What matters is what really happens in people's lives. And often there is a gap. And I think we saw some of that with some of the pandemic programs. President Biden, with getting vaccines into arms, it's been very successful, how quickly he ramped up vaccinations, but there are other programs that have not worked as intended and have not been deployed and people have struggled to get help. And we want to make sure that infrastructure, that those investments get out into our community and that Orange County gets its fair share, and that we put people to work in good high paying infrastructure jobs. So, if you could follow up with my office, I would really appreciate it.

Nora Walsh-DeVries:

Awesome. And we have one final question from Tony in Laguna Woods. Tony, you should be live.

Tony in Laguna Woods:

Thank you. Thank you, Katie Porter. I think you're fantastic. I was asking how—because I don't have a lot of money at this time to throw at it. And I did contribute to Biden. I contributed to Hillary. I contributed to every Democratic situation. But what my question was, is, being that I live in an area that is extremely Republican. I don't know what I can do as an individual. People are lashing out at each other. It's been really difficult. And there, because we're dealing with non-facts, and all of that I want to know what I can do, other than just voting, and giving some little donations as an individual to be able to represent or to have these people understand reality, or what I can do to make a difference. Because I'm facing this every day. You know, people protesting—

Congresswoman Porter:

Well, absolutely. Thank you for your question. And first, I just want to say, don't diminish the power of voting. Celebrate that. That is no small feat, especially during this pandemic. And so, I commend you for voting, for encouraging others to vote, and I encourage people to learn more about how we vote in Orange County. We have one of the very best, I think we have the best Registrar of Voters in the country here in Orange County, and pre-pandemic, and I hope again soon, he offers learning sessions and opportunities to tour the Registrar of Voters to see how that happens. So don't discount the power of voting. It matters.

Congresswoman Porter:

The second thing I wanted to say is I think your point about wanting people to understand why other people have different perspectives, and to have respect for different values and to care about issues, and to come up with solutions. I definitely think joining some of the groups that work on the specific issues that interest you, whether that's climate change, whether that's preventing domestic violence, whether that's gun violence prevention, whether that's mental health, some of the things we've talked about tonight, can help you find a community of people who care about the issue. And they may not all think the same way, but that community, I think, especially during COVID, in a time when our media is so partisan and hostile, that can really be an important way of thinking about how you can make a difference, how can we come together. And I think one of the most difficult things about democracy is that it is a collective enterprise. It requires more than just any one of us. And if you didn't know that before, boy, you learn it when you get to Congress and you are one of 435 representatives. And so, I encourage you within your community and safely here with during what we hope is the last few weeks and months of this pandemic, to connect to some of the interest groups and organizations. And that could be everything from something that

that focuses particularly on seniors and the problems confronting them, but I think that kind of engagement and involvement, learning more about an issue, and coming together with a small group of people to work on solutions can really help that feeling of what can you do, that feeling of powerlessness, because that is really counter to our democracy.

Congresswoman Porter:

And I want to thank you for participating in tonight's town hall, for listening, and I want to thank everyone for listening. And for joining us tonight. We had a very, very high call volume. And I'm so sorry that we were not able to answer everyone's questions. So, I want to make sure you know how to reach us. If your question wasn't answered, or you have a story or experience you want to share, you can reach my office during normal business hours at, and I'm going to give this number a couple times, 949-668-6600. And if we don't answer, then please leave a voicemail. Give us your name, your email address, your zip code, and share what you want to share, either a question or a comment. Again, that number is 949-668-6600. We also have a lot of information on our website, which is www.porter.house.gov. And our latest addition to that website is a special tab for the kids of the 45th congressional district. We get a lot of wonderful questions and engagement from students. And we're continuing to add resources to that website. So, if you don't find the information you need there, let us know and we'll do our best to get it up there.

Congresswoman Porter:

Thank you so much everyone for joining tonight. And make sure you're staying alert on social media and to our newsletter. We have more town halls to come, including the upcoming one I mentioned about the filibuster. What is it? Where did it come from, and what should we do about it? So, I hope to have you all join us at the next town hall. Thank you and stay safe!

This transcription has been lightly edited for clarity.