BLACK ECONOMIC ALLIANCE
WORK • WAGES • WEALTH

To: Interested Parties
From: Black Economic Alliance (BEA)
Date: October 6, 2026
Re: Winning with Black Voters on Affordability and Economic Mobility

Across the country, Americans are deeply worried about affordability — the rising cost of groceries, housing, and healthcare — and increasingly describe an economy that isn't working for them.

Over the last four months, BEA conducted extensive battleground-state polling and focus groups[1] to understand what voters — and Black voters in particular — mean when they talk about affordability, and what solutions they believe would make the greatest difference.

I. KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

What we found was clear.

Rising costs matter to Americans not simply because they are making life more expensive, but **because they make it harder to buy a home, achieve financial stability, and create greater economic opportunity for themselves and their families — in other words, because they make it harder to get ahead.** What Americans are describing as an affordability crisis is also a crisis of upward economic mobility.

Again and again, Black voters across our battleground-state polling gravitated toward a combination of solutions that provide immediate relief from rising costs *and* build pathways to help them get ahead.

The solutions that performed best with Black voters, and all voters, are:

- Increasing wages to keep pace with the cost of living. (56% of Black voters and 43% of all voters picked in their top 3)
- Ensuring corporations and wealthy interests pay their fair share. (47% of Black voters and 45% of all voters picked in their top 3)
- Creating an affordable health insurance option. (45% of Black voters and 38% of all voters picked in their top 3)
- Capping medical and prescription costs. (37% of Black voters and 45% of all voters picked in their top 3)

[1] Email- and text-to web battleground-state survey of 1,400 registered voters and an oversample of 400 Black voters, commissioned by BEA and conducted by Workbench Strategies from July 6-14, 2026; and focus groups commissioned by BEA and conducted by HIT Strategies.

II. MESSAGING GUIDANCE

From BEA's polling and focus group emerged a set of affordability messaging principles:

DO pair addressing rising costs with how it impacts Black voters' ability to get ahead…
DON'T focus on affordability issues alone or in a vacuum.

DO focus on concrete achievable solutions (like those outlined in this memo) and use specific examples of where it has worked before…
DON'T offer solutions without a plan to deliver…
DON'T simply point fingers at "villains" without explaining WHY they are to blame.

DO talk about expanding opportunity and removing barriers that deny people the agency to take advantage of it…
DON'T talk about government replacing personal responsibility.

DO employ Black small business owners as messengers and validators on affordability issues.

III. SOLUTIONS

What emerged from BEA's research was a need for a practical bridge between the affordability crisis Americans are experiencing – a crisis Black Americans are experiencing most acutely – the solutions they believe will help them get ahead, and the evidence on what actually works.

To identify that bridge, BEA combined the battleground-state polling, focus groups, and message testing with policy analysis conducted by a cross-sector brain trust of leaders from government, finance, housing, healthcare, workforce development, and business.[2]

The solutions that Black Americans, and all Americans, want their leaders to prioritize and have the greatest potential to produce meaningful results are below.

[2] Experts spanning government, finance, health policy, housing, corporate strategy, and workforce development sectors -- representing institutions that collectively oversee over $1.5 trillion in financial and real estate assets, inform policies affecting more than 50 million workers and households nationwide, and hold direct strategic leadership across federal economic agencies, Fortune 500 food and agriculture corporations, top-tier venture capital, and the country's leading national health policy divisions.

Relief from Rising Costs

- ***Cap medical service costs and promote prescription drug competition.***
- ***Require large tech facilities to fund upgrades and community benefits.***
- ***Fund home repairs and resiliency upgrades to lower monthly housing costs.***
- ***Expand the Section 1332 waiver program to provide matching funds to states that set up healthcare reinsurance programs.***
- ***Strengthen food subsidies and regional food networks to lower grocery bills.***
- ***Expand the Earned Income and Child Tax Credits and restore monthly CTC payments.***

Pathways to Economic Mobility

- ***Guarantee a $15 minimum wage and link automatic increases to median wages.***
- ***Guarantee job seekers receive paid work-based learning and career preparation.***
- ***Expand employee stock ownership and simplify employee business buyouts.***
- ***Modernize the Fair Labor Standards Act to include fair scheduling protections and minimum job-quality standards.***
- ***Align public financing tools around the goal of building 7 million affordable homes.***
- ***Provide interest-free down payment capital options.***

Ensure Trust in the Economic System

- ***Tax investment-based pay the same as regular wages, and close tax loopholes for the ultra-wealthy.***
- ***Enforce fair pricing rules and market transparency across food supply chains.***
- ***Mandate standardized billing and complete financial disclosure across healthcare entities.***

I. SOLUTIONS: RESEARCH GROUNDING AND DETAILS

Relief from Rising Costs

Cap medical service costs and promote prescription drug competition.

In our polling, 45% of respondents selected putting price caps on medical services, procedures, and prescriptions as one of their top healthcare priorities, making it the strongest-performing healthcare affordability proposal tested. Respondents likewise supported keeping the prices of generic drugs, like insulin, from being hiked. In our focus groups, participants repeatedly described healthcare costs as one of the many pressures competing with groceries, housing, transportation, and other essentials. One participant described facing a $1,200 monthly gap after insurance stopped covering their children's asthma medication, illustrating how quickly prescription costs can become a financial crisis.

Increasing competition in the prescription drug market is one of the best ways to limit costs for consumers without increasing insurance premiums, and it saves states money. Similarly, when **medical service costs are capped**, research has shown approximately $780 million in Medicare savings, a 6% drop in hospital spending, improved service use and quality, and, perhaps most importantly, consumer protection from exorbitant prices. In a resource-intensive industry like pharmaceutical drug manufacturing, intentional action is needed to ensure competitive pricing, such as explicitly outlawing pay-for-delay tactics that allow big companies to pay generic drug makers *not* to make a generic drug, funding state efforts to partner with non-profit generic drug manufacturers, and extending Medicare's negotiated rates directly to private commercial health plans.

The cost of prescription drugs has become a major source of financial stress for American families. In fact, 43% of adults report that they have not taken their medication as prescribed at some point in the past year because of the cost. Meanwhile, many brand-name prescription drug prices have increased faster than inflation, placing growing pressure on household budgets. Similarly, medical costs—particularly at hospitals—have driven millions of Americans to put off essential care because of the expense. Hospital costs over the past two decades have risen much faster than any other sector of the U.S. economy, with hospitals charging private insurance increasingly more than Medicare (over three times more in consolidated markets). At the same time, the mandate requiring many hospitals to provide financial assistance for eligible patients remains significantly underenforced.

What Americans want this solution to deliver: affordable access to the medicines and care they need at reasonable prices, and the peace of mind that their health will not become a financial crisis.

Require large tech facilities to fund upgrades and community benefits.

Families shouldn't have to pay higher utility bills so large corporations can expand. **Requiring large infrastructure users to sign community benefits agreements and pay for the utility upgrades and infrastructure expansions they need** would apply a simple principle: communities should share in the benefits of growth without being forced to bear its costs.

Modern data centers can consume as much electricity as tens of thousands of homes and place significant demands on local water resources. As data centers and other infrastructure-intensive industries grow, they require enormous amounts of electricity, water, and new infrastructure. In fact, annual data center energy use is expected to represent up to 12.0% of total U.S. electricity consumption forecasted by 2028, up from 1.9% in 2018. As utilities invest in new power generation, transmission lines, substations, and water infrastructure to meet that demand, policymakers must decide who should pay for those upgrades.

It is unsurprising, then, that 74% of voters selected requiring data centers to pay for the water and electricity they use as one of their top priorities, making it one of the strongest-performing policy ideas tested. Across focus groups, participants repeatedly expressed frustration that ordinary households are asked to absorb rising costs while large corporations benefit.

What Americans want this solution to deliver: lower pressure on household utility bills and a fairer system where communities aren't forced to subsidize corporate growth.

Fund home repairs and resiliency upgrades to lower monthly housing costs.

For many homeowners, the cost of owning a home doesn't stop at the mortgage payment; in fact, non-mortgage-related housing costs are roughly half of the total cost of homeownership and the bulk of budgets for homeowners without mortgages. In our polling, repair costs and monthly home insurance premiums stood out as areas where respondents need relief.

By investing in the repairs, weatherization measures, and resiliency upgrades that insurers recognize as reducing risk, policymakers can help families lower long-term housing costs while reducing the factors that drive insurance premiums upward. In places like Louisiana, where the state has combined investment in residents' ability to take on necessary resiliency upgrades with requirements that insurance companies provide an aligned premium discount, the typical homeowner saved $1,250 (22%) on annual homeowner's insurance costs.

The nation's housing stock is now the oldest on record, with the median age over 40 years old, requiring expensive maintenance and repairs. Far from being just about keeping homes looking nice on the outside, older homes increase the risk of lead and mold exposure, costing Americans over $50 billion a year. At the same time, maintenance and repair costs have also continued to rise, outpacing inflation and wage growth. Finally, with the increasing frequency and threat of severe weather, homeowners insurance premiums have climbed nationally and sharply in many parts of the country.

What Americans want this solution to deliver: lower ownership costs, keep their homes safe, and avoid being priced out by rising repair and insurance costs.

Expand the Section 1332 waiver program to provide matching funds to states that set up healthcare reinsurance programs.

In our polling, health insurance premiums ranked among the largest overall household budget drains and drove specific healthcare cost concerns, with an affordable public option the top-tested solution. **Enhance and expand the successes of state-led healthcare reinsurance programs with Section 1332 waivers by providing federal matching funds**. To ensure national coverage, Congress should consider pairing this expansion with a limited, federal backstop reinsurance program to cover Americans in states that opt not to apply for a waiver. Reinsurance programs help immediately reduce costs across the broader insurance market by offsetting the most expensive claims, lowering premiums, and making coverage more affordable for families who purchase insurance on their own. In the dozen-plus states that have implemented similar market stabilization approaches, premiums have decreased by an average of 15%.

Over the last two and a half decades, health insurance premium costs have skyrocketed 342%, nearly three times the increase in mean worker earnings—effectively negating the impact of wage increases. It is unsurprising, then, that nearly 40% of Americans worry about affording their monthly health insurance premiums while almost a quarter are underinsured, meaning their coverage does not provide them affordable access to healthcare.

What Americans want this solution to deliver: affordable health insurance with adequate coverage that they can rely on.

Strengthen food subsidies and regional food networks to lower grocery bills.

Grocery prices remain roughly one-third higher than they were before the pandemic. As grocery prices continue to strain household budgets, our polling found groceries as the second-most-selected source of household budget stress and the most-selected among financially free-falling voters; our focus group participants repeatedly pointed to food costs as one of the clearest signs their paychecks no longer stretch as far as they used to. **Increasing subsidies for the food families actually buy and investing in efficient, innovative regional supply and distribution networks** will enable policymakers to lower grocery costs.

Today, the federal government heavily subsidizes the supply chain for a handful of commodity crops, like corn and soybeans, while many of the fruits, vegetables, and other foods families buy every week receive far less support. Yet these foods are often more labor-intensive to grow and more expensive to process, store, and transport. Relatedly, families don't just pay for the food they buy—they also pay for the inefficiencies that move food from farms to grocery stores. In the United States, farmers receive less than 12 cents of every dollar spent on food. The rest goes toward processing, packaging, transportation, storage, and distribution rather than the food itself.

America's food system should be organized around helping families afford their weekly groceries, not overly subsidizing things we don't regularly eat and an inefficient supply chain.

What Americans want this solution to deliver: lower grocery bills with more money left over at the end of the month for other household expenses and to get ahead.

Expand the Earned Income and Child Tax Credits and restore monthly CTC payments.

For many households, financial security depends not only on what they earn, but also on whether the tax code recognizes the costs of living. Unsurprisingly, in our polling, taxes were the most frequent strain on household budgets. To ensure federal taxes don't make it harder for workers and families to reach their goals, **policymakers must expand the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for low-wage workers without children**—who currently receive very little support — **make the Child Tax Credit (CTC) fully refundable, and restore monthly payments that help families manage expenses throughout the year.**

The reality is that raising children has become increasingly expensive, and many workers in essential jobs still struggle to achieve financial stability despite working full time. While not a silver bullet solution, a more balanced tax system can help level the economic playing field. Consider the federal Child Tax Credit (CTC), which Congress expanded and made more widely available during the pandemic. The impact was unprecedented: in a single year, the updated

CTC lifted 5.3 million people out of poverty, including 2.9 million children. Child poverty fell to its lowest level on record and was cut by more than half among Black children.

Together, these reforms would help households keep more of their income, provide more consistent support for raising children, and reduce the financial instability that pushes households further behind when costs rise.

What Americans want this solution to deliver: a tax code that helps them build stability, raise their children, and get ahead rather than merely stay afloat.

Pathways to Economic Mobility

Guarantee a $15 minimum wage and link automatic increases to median wages.

Increasing wages to keep up with the cost of living was one of the strongest-performing workforce ideas tested, with 43% of voters supporting it. Hard work should make it possible not only to keep up with the bills, but to build greater financial security over time. **Raising the federal minimum wage to $15 an hour and modernizing it by indexing it to median wage growth** will stop average workers from falling behind when wages rise for others in the economy. Rather than requiring lawmakers to revisit the wage floor repeatedly, it would create a system that helps ensure workers share more consistently in broader wage gains and economic growth. And wage floors don't just affect workers earning the minimum wage—they help establish pay expectations across the labor market.

What Americans want this solution to deliver: everyone who contributes to the economy's growth should get a fair share of the benefits.

Guarantee job seekers receive paid work-based learning and career preparation.

In our polling, increasing access to good jobs and pathways to opportunity consistently emerged as a top voter priority. To make that a reality, elected officials must **guarantee every unemployed and underemployed American access to paid apprenticeships, work-based learning, and any needed pre-employment training**.

For decades, Americans have been told that more education is the surest path to a better job. But many voters and focus group participants increasingly question whether the payoff is still there, with trade schools repeatedly surfacing as a more practical alternative. At the same time,

too many unemployed and underemployed workers still receive training programs without a clear route to employment.

Apprenticeships offer a different model: workers earn a paycheck while gaining skills that lead directly to employment. In fact, apprentices are more likely to secure employment and earn significantly more—up to $18,772 more per year—compared to workers who do not participate in apprenticeship programs. Rather than asking people to leave the workforce, take on debt, or pursue credentials with uncertain market value, apprenticeships connect learning to real jobs and real earnings.

Building on the success of the American Apprenticeship Initiative, apprenticeships should be expanded into both traditional skilled trades and emerging sectors such as advanced manufacturing, logistics, health care, and artificial intelligence. By guaranteeing access to paid work-based learning, workers can earn a paycheck while developing in-demand skills and building clear pathways into good jobs that don't require a four-year degree.

What Americans want this solution to deliver: get paid while gaining new skills and building a clear pathway into a career that helps them get ahead, not just get by.

Expand employee stock ownership and simplify employee business buyouts.

Many Americans increasingly feel disconnected from the success their work helps create. To keep workers' earnings growing at pace with company success, policymakers must **reform the tax code to incentivize Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) conversions, the availability and uptake of Employee Stock Purchase Plans (ESPPs), and worker buyouts when business owners retire, and streamline the ESOP process.**

Since 1979, worker productivity has grown far faster than typical worker compensation, while increasing stock-based compensation has allowed many executives to capture a disproportionate share of economic gains. For example, chief executives at the 350 largest U.S. firms earned about 281 times what a typical worker earned—up from 21 times in 1965 and 31 times in 1978—and from 1978 to 2024 top executive pay rose roughly 1,094% while the typical worker's pay rose about 26%. For many workers, the result is a growing sense that hard work contributes to company success without providing a meaningful stake in that success.

Employee ownership offers a different model. Through tools such as ESOPs, ESPPs, and related ownership structures, workers can build assets and long-term wealth through the companies they help grow. Rather than relying solely on wages, employees gain a stake in the business's success itself. Research consistently finds that employee-owned companies are associated with

higher worker wealth, stronger retirement savings, lower turnover, and greater worker engagement. Employee ownership helps local, small- and medium-sized businesses stay in the community while giving workers a way to build wealth in different types of investments.

What Americans want this solution to deliver: when the company succeeds, workers' hard work and contributions to its success should also be rewarded.

Modernize the Fair Labor Standards Act to include fair scheduling protections and minimum job-quality standards.

Participants in our focus groups repeatedly described an economy in which they were expected to work harder and absorb higher costs, but not reap the benefits of economic growth.

The research supports their feelings—until the late 1970s, U.S. labor productivity and typical worker compensation grew nearly in lockstep, but since 1979, net productivity has grown at nearly four times the rate of typical worker income. Over the same time period, scheduling has become more short-notice and variable, and working nontraditional hours lacks mandated additional compensation. All of these changes have coincided with the precipitous decrease in workers' collective leverage.

The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) has not been comprehensively updated since the 1970s, and no longer addresses modern work culture. **Policymakers can modernize it to include fair scheduling protections, increased worker bargaining power, and minimum job-quality standards** such as guaranteed paid leave.

Far from just good policy for workers, these reforms make good business sense. Scheduling experiments have demonstrated that stable scheduling increases both sales and productivity while reducing turnover and related costs.

What Americans want this solution to deliver: a system that rewards their hard work with high-quality benefits.

Align public financing tools around the goal of building 7 million affordable homes.

Beyond down payments, one of the biggest factors making it so hard to buy a home today is the simple lack of supply. To build the estimated 7 million more homes needed to meet American families' needs, elected officials should **align public financing tools and leverage public-private partnerships to encourage the construction of high-quality homes within families' budgets**.

We have been here before. Following 15 years of severe underbuilding during the Great Depression and World War II, returning veterans faced an unprecedented housing deficit. In response, the Federal Government aligned public financing tools, like the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the VA Home Loan Program, to expand the affordable housing supply, guaranteeing construction lines of credit for developers who agreed to build affordable housing and mortgage financing for homebuyers. Those who could benefit from this alignment often leveraged it into economic mobility.

Modern housing policies must embrace that same ambition, prioritizing attainable housing for first-time buyers, working families, and long-term community residents in a market dominated by luxury development and investor demand. Targeting investment in workforce and right-sized homes would help create a more balanced housing market, strengthen local communities, and restore a pathway to homeownership that has become increasingly out of reach for many Americans.

What Americans want this solution to deliver: if you work hard, you should be able to put down roots in the community where you want to live.

Provide interest-free down payment capital options.

Beyond providing shelter, home equity helps families build wealth, weather financial setbacks, and invest in major life milestones. In our polling, property taxes were the single most-cited housing cost that voters said would make life more affordable if addressed. But concerns about economic stability extended far beyond property taxes. Across our focus groups, participants repeatedly described feeling squeezed by rising costs, struggling to save, and increasingly uncertain that hard work alone is enough to build wealth or get ahead. Housing was consistently discussed not only as a place to live, but as a foundation for financial security, upward mobility, and the ability to pass something on to the next generation. To keep homeownership as a cornerstone financial asset, **lawmakers must once again support robust interest-free down payment capital**, such as down payment assistance and interest rate buydowns, for working families ready to put down roots but unable to clear the initial financial hurdle.

For potential homebuyers without access to family wealth, entering the market now requires navigating historically high upfront costs and less-than-favorable interest rates, all while keeping up with rent, childcare, student loans, and other household expenses. The number of homes listed for sale that are affordable to households earning $75,000 or less is down 60% from 2019 levels. That's why 74% of prospective homebuyers and 85% of first-time homebuyers say

financial obstacles have kept them from buying a home this year, with down payments the most cited reason.

Despite the typical renter household having just about $1,800 in savings, homebuyers today would have to pay at least $14,000 upfront to afford the typical home. While conventional wisdom says buyers need to invest money upfront to demonstrate "skin in the game," modern research proves that receiving interest-free down payment capital does not lead to higher default rates.

What Americans want this solution to deliver: a realistic shot at owning a home, building wealth, and passing something on to the next generation.

Ensure Trust in the Economic System

Tax investment-based pay the same as regular wages, and close tax loopholes for the ultra-wealthy.

Among the ideas tested in our polling, ensuring that corporations, millionaires, and billionaires pay their fair share emerged as one of the top priorities for voters. Across focus groups, participants repeatedly expressed frustration that working families are doing everything right but still struggle to build wealth and get ahead while large businesses and wealthy households appear to benefit from advantages unavailable to most Americans. Congressional leaders must reform the federal tax code to **reduce disparities between the taxation of wages and investment-based compensation packages and address inheritance-related tax preferences that allow large amounts of wealth to avoid taxation across generations**.

Policymakers frequently emphasize the importance of work, yet the tax code often treats income earned through work less favorably than income earned through wealth. Investment income is taxed at lower rates than wages, allowing some wealthy households to pay lower tax rates on their income than many workers pay on theirs. At the same time, the step-up in basis loophole allows large fortunes to grow without ever being fully taxed. The result is a system that often taxes work more heavily than wealth and rewards ownership far more than labor. These tax provisions work together to concentrate capital highly and choke mobility.

What Americans want this solution to deliver: a tax system that rewards hard work, supports wealth-building, and gives wage earners a fair chance to get ahead.

Enforce fair pricing rules and market transparency across food supply chains.

In our polling, groceries were the second-most-selected source of household budget stress, and focus groups repeatedly found that voters are deeply skeptical that food markets are working fairly. Americans' skepticism is reflected in the research, which shows that, generally, high levels of market concentration in recent years have been correlated not only with higher prices for consumers, but also with lower overall productivity.

Across the food system, a small number of companies increasingly control what farmers can sell, what retailers can buy, and what consumers ultimately pay. To address this, lawmakers can **strengthen enforcement of the Robinson-Patman Act, require greater disclosure of pricing arrangements and livestock sales, and improve transparency as food moves from farms to processors to retailers**. Doing so will ensure highly concentrated firms compete by offering better prices and services rather than leveraging market power.

What Americans want this solution to deliver: fair, reliable prices and fewer opportunities for powerful companies to game the system.

Mandate standardized billing and complete financial disclosure across healthcare entities.

Today, Americans face a deeply opaque healthcare system. Hidden facility fees, internal rebates, and convoluted billing make it nearly impossible to track rising costs. Our polling reflects this frustration, with 56% of respondents supporting action against large insurers that raise prices to boost corporate profits.

As healthcare grows more consolidated, lawmakers must mandate billing transparency and clear financial disclosures across the market. This includes **mandating standardized billing and use of propensity-to-pay scoring models, full public disclosure of how healthcare spending is distributed, and setting disclosure standards about pricing and financial relationships among healthcare entities.** When healthcare markets are transparent, companies compete on value rather than exploiting complexity.

What Americans want this solution to deliver: confidence that the healthcare system is not financially taking advantage of them.

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