

May 8, 2020

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Governor
State of Florida
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001
governorron.desantis@eog.myflorida.com

The Honorable Jeanette Nuñez
Lieutenant Governor
State of Florida
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001
jeanette.nunez@eog.myflorida.com

The Honorable Bill Galvano
President
Florida Senate
409, The Capitol
404 S. Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1100
galvano.bill@flsenate.gov

The Honorable Audrey Gibson
Minority Leader
Florida Senate
200, Senate Building
404 S. Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1100
gibson.audrey@flsenate.gov

The Honorable Jose Oliva
Speaker
Florida House of Representatives
420, The Capitol
402 S. Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1300
jose.oliva@myfloridahouse.gov

The Honorable Kionne McGhee
Minority Leader
Florida House of Representatives
316, The Capitol
402 S. Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1300
Kionne.McGhee@myfloridahouse.gov

Re: Now Is the Time to Remove State Barriers to Hispanic Relief and Recovery in Florida

Dear Governor DeSantis, Lt. Governor Nuñez, President Galvano, Leader Gibson, Speaker Oliva, and Leader McGhee:

UnidosUS (formerly the National Council of La Raza) and its 17 Florida Affiliates thank you for the State of Florida's various efforts to respond to the economic and health impacts of COVID-19 facing millions of Hispanic Floridians. For example, the partnership between the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to pilot online grocery purchasing with Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards is very effective; this program needs to be made permanent. The far-reaching, multilevel impacts of COVID-19 still require attention and action by our state leaders. For this reason, I am writing to urge you to call a special legislative session this summer to permanently remove barriers preventing Hispanic Floridians from recovering fully from the current economic downturn and public health crisis.

As background, UnidosUS is the nation's largest Hispanic¹ civil rights and advocacy organization. Through its unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an Affiliate Network of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico, UnidosUS simultaneously challenges the social, economic, and political barriers at the national and local levels. For more than 50 years, UnidosUS has united communities and different groups seeking common ground through collaboration, and that share a desire to make our country stronger.

As you know, the state of Florida is at a pivot crossroads. As the state slowly reopens, the economic and health recovery will take far longer, especially for Hispanics who are living paycheck-to-paycheck, working reduced hours, or—worse—newly unemployed. In the past decade, much of Florida's economic growth has been due to the contributions of Florida's highly industrious Hispanic community, as confirmed by the Florida Legislature's Office of Economic Development and Growth, "Florida's strong positive net migration." However, Latinos in Florida continue to experience significant economic, educational, and health disparities. Without swift state policy changes, Hispanics in Florida will be worse off than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the Florida Department of Health GIS data, as well as 2018 U.S. Census Bureau data, the Latino population is greater than 40% in 32 of the top 50 ZIP Codes with the most identified cases of COVID-19. In Hialeah, which is predominantly Latino, more than 817 cases had been identified by May 6. When weighted for geographic outbreak areas, the distribution of COVID-19 deaths is 45.2% Latino. This is unacceptable. Florida's Hispanic population is represented in all industries of essential workers—from food supply to medical care—and risking their lives to serve the state and people of Florida during this pandemic. Yet our state leaders have chosen to leave legal and other barriers in place that hinder workers and Hispanic small businesses from relief and recovery. State leaders ought to support more vigorously those Hispanic workers and small business that are keeping Florida's economy afloat.

We need sustained, proactive action from state leaders to protect the public health and economic recovery of all Floridians, and that starts with calling a special session this summer. During that session, we urge you to act on the following state policy recommendations that will help the entire state and Florida's Latino community to build the necessary resiliency to withstand future shocks in the years to come.

¹ The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. This document may also refer to this population as "Latinx" to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.

HEALTH AND NUTRITION

- **Implement proactive testing in hard-hit Florida communities.** Many Hispanic Floridians are on the frontlines of this crisis. Implementing a proactive, community-based testing program—in partnership with trusted organizations—that tests all residents for COVID-19 (including antibodies) in “hot spot” ZIP Codes is necessary to accurately count the number of cases and understand its impact on Hispanics and the public at large.
- **Provide COVID-19 test results within 48 hours of initial symptoms.** Newer generations of tests can give faster results, and numerous tests can be administered simultaneously. Providing participants with test results within 48 hours will allow them to adjust their daily routine and curb the spread of the virus to other family members and/or co-workers.
- **Remove the time limitations on SNAP.** Under the latest executive orders, families currently under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are granted the maximum monthly allotment per household size, and work requirements are waived temporarily. It is imperative to make the elimination of work requirements for SNAP and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) permanent. Per the approval of USDA, all SNAP households that are eligible to receive less than the maximum monthly benefit receive the emergency allotment supplement to bring them up to the maximum. We support continued extensions of the emergency allotments month by month as prescribed by the law, until Florida’s unemployment rate reaches the pre-pandemic rate.
- **Implement the Pandemic-EBT plan.** Thank you for directing the Florida DCF to work with the USDA to submit a plan to allow families whose children are eligible for free and reduced-price school lunch to receive SNAP benefits. We urge the implementation of the P-EBT plan so that no child stays hungry. Once the P-EBT plan is approved, Florida needs to launch a public information campaign to alert eligible families of the benefit. Public information campaigns that update Florida residents about changes in benefits, eligibility for state programs, and other measures need to be available in Spanish and Haitian Creole. We recommend working with trusted community partners throughout the state within, but not limited to, DCF’s community partner network.
- **Narrow the gap in WIC participation.** More than 400,000 Florida households eligible for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program are not enrolled. Similar to the eligibility process for P-EBT, the Florida Department of Health needs to work together with DCF and Florida schools to make sure that more eligible households are aware of the benefit. Furthermore, the State of Florida needs to continue to work with WIC agencies and community-based organizations to ensure that remaining eligible Floridians are able to apply for WIC.
- **Continue to expand access to online groceries for needy families.** Piloting the program for Floridians participating in SNAP to be able to order groceries online helps lessen families’ exposure during the pandemic and avoid overflow in grocery stores. However, Floridians need more options beyond Amazon and Walmart. We recommend that

Florida expand access to other grocers that have the infrastructure for online shopping such as Publix, ALDI, Sam's Club, and Sedano's. All of the aforementioned stores accept EBT as payment and offer options for online ordering, and we recommend partnering with smaller grocers in the future that offer online shopping and accept EBT cards.

- **Close the Medicaid coverage gap.** As of May 1, 2020, the Florida Agency for Health Care Administration announced the extension of flexibilities to Medicaid implemented during the state of emergency until further notice. Florida can improve the health and economic well-being of Latino families by supporting efforts to increase health care access to uninsured Floridians, which includes expanding its Medicaid program as part of its implementation of the Affordable Care Act. Medicaid expansion in Florida would provide coverage for 850,000 Floridians, including 200,000 Latinos. Eliminating the five-year waiting period for pregnant women to access Medicaid via the Immigrant Children's Health Improvement Act (ICHIA) Option would narrow additional gaps in coverage. Adopting the new coverage option for COVID-19 testing for the uninsured with a 100% FMAP would also help reach those in the coverage gap.
- **Reimburse community nonprofits and places of worship for benefit enrollment.** Closure of DCF offices across the state has shifted the state benefit workload to local nonprofits and places of worship and placed great financial stress on them. Establishing a certified community partners program that reimburses nonprofits and places of worship for staff time spent enrolling Floridians in DCF and Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO) benefit programs creates a more holistic social services delivery system. This would help maximize community impact and financially reinforce local service providers.

HOUSING

- **Expand the statewide moratorium on evictions and foreclosures to the end of 2020.** As of today, the statewide moratorium, per executive order 20-94, expires on May 17, 2020. Ensuring that homeowners and renters can safely stay in their homes is an important element of the public health response to the coronavirus crisis. To achieve this goal, Florida's legislature should enact a statewide moratorium on foreclosures and evictions through the end of 2020. Moreover, the state ought to make explicit that the moratorium would apply to all mortgages and rental housing units, not just to federally backed or subsidized housing units. The expanded moratorium provides homeowners with more time to request mortgage relief and renters time to contact property owners and make the necessary arrangements that would allow them to remain in place during the pandemic.
- **Direct CDBG-CV funds to Floridians who need it most.** The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) makes supplemental Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding available to prevent, prepare for, and respond to coronavirus (CDBG-CV grants). To the extent possible under the law the state should guide county and city jurisdictions to use CDBG-CV funds to provide direct rental assistance to tenants

who have lost their jobs and notified their landlords of their inability to make payments. In addition, CDBG-CV grants could be deployed to fund nonprofit community-based service providers to meet the expected increase in demand for foreclosure and eviction prevention services.

- **Provide mortgage and rental assistance.** Floridians need the help of mortgage and rental assistance to allow them to stay in their homes; even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Latino families were already struggling to find a home they could afford. The state should use the fully funded Sadowski Affordable Housing Trust Fund to make this assistance available. Under the declaration of emergency, the State Housing Initiatives Partnership (SHIP) should activate the disaster strategies within the local SHIP plans in all 67 counties.

ECONOMIC RELIEF

- **Fix Florida's broken unemployment system.** The problems associated with Florida's unemployment system extend beyond a malfunctioning website and have been persistent for nearly a decade. Suspending requirements such as work search, work registration, and biweekly reporting until Florida's unemployment rate returns to the February 2020 level of 2.8% would give workers easier access to benefits and simplify their navigation of reemployment assistance. Furthermore, the state needs to guarantee that newly unemployed workers will receive all their state benefits retroactive to March 1, 2020, and state officials should work with their federal counterparts to ensure that impacted workers will retroactively receive their \$600 weekly federal benefits. After federal unemployment benefits expire, Florida should increase weekly unemployment benefits to \$600 for 25 weeks to quicken economic recovery and stabilize family budgets. Lastly, the state needs to permanently remove math, reading, and research skills testing from the unemployment application process, determine applicant eligibility within three business days, and notify claimants within five business days on how to appeal and resolve ineligibility issues.
- **Establish a state earned sick time law for all workers.** Florida has one of the highest populations without access to paid sick time, which disproportionately affects hospitality and tourism workers, especially Hispanics. An earned sick time law would require all public and private employers to allow all workers, including gig employees, to accrue paid time off to seek medical care or deal with a mental or physical illness to prevent the spread of highly contagious viruses, such as COVID-19, to fellow employees and customers.
- **Create a state-based refundable Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).** In tax year 2015, approximately two million tax filers in Florida received \$5.2 billion worth of tax credits through the EITC, and the latest Census data show that 32% of EITC beneficiaries were Latino. Florida lawmakers can implement a state-based tax credit based on the federal EITC. Similar to the federal EITC, a state refundable credit would help keep people working, help low-income families make ends meet, and reduce poverty. Across the

country, other states and the District of Columbia have already created or enacted a state based EITC program, including Washington, a state without an income tax like Florida. A Florida state EITC program matching the federal credit could benefit up to an estimated six million Florida households.

- **Institute a 36% cap on interest rates for consumer loans.** A 36% annual interest rate cap on payday, car title, and consumer installment loans will prevent future bankruptcies and overdraft fees that trap people in a cycle of debt, keeping them in a perpetual state of poverty and widening the income gap.
- **Support Latino-owned businesses by partnering with Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs).** More than 37,000 businesses were denied credit by Florida’s Small Business Emergency Bridge Loan Program last month. CDFIs are trusted by small businesses in underserved communities and can help mitigate the current economic challenges. Strengthening the state’s efforts to support small businesses, including through support of CDFIs, would help build the capacity of these community-based lenders to ensure that small businesses and nonprofit organizations are able to maintain payroll and operations.

EDUCATION

- **Prioritize early childhood education.** The CARES Act directly supports early childhood education, including \$3.5 billion for the Child Care and Development Block Grant program and \$750 million for Head Start. These grants provide immediate assistance to childcare providers to prevent them from going out of business and to support childcare services for families, including for essential workers playing critical roles during this crisis. Florida needs to work with community-based organizations and local governments to make sure that these funds are allocated where they are needed most. This includes early childhood education for migrant families since farmworkers continue to provide essential services to feed the state and the nation.
- **Provide support for Florida’s English learners (ELs).** Florida has the third largest EL population in the nation. With more than 300,000 ELs throughout the state, targeted and robust funding for online learning support for ELs is needed, including devices, connectivity, and digital programs. Trainings for EL teachers, who have reported fewer hours of professional development with digital learning resources than mainstream teachers, are also necessary. Many EL children are experiencing high levels of stress—parents have lost their jobs, or they are afraid that their parents who are providing services will become infected, or they have family members who are sick or have died—all factors that are especially damaging for students. Mental health support for ELs, and all students, mitigates the risks of stress on their social-emotional well-being.
- **Dedicate aid for college students.** State funds need to be dedicated to students who are not included in the federal CARES Act. Florida student grants would allow more students experiencing financial hardship to pay for tuition, books, housing, and other basic needs.

- **Advocate for additional federal stimulus for education.** The federal stimulus is insufficient to address the educational needs brought on by the COVID-19 crisis, especially those of Florida’s most vulnerable students. State leaders should present Florida’s needs to federal government leadership to secure additional rounds of education stimulus. We urge you to advocate for supplemental funding for Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in the next relief package to help ensure that Florida’s school districts have the necessary resources to address the unique needs of our EL students.

The undersigned urge you all to call a special legislative session this summer to address these issues that prevent all Floridians from a full recovery from the current economic downturn and public health crisis. We urge you to acknowledge the sacrifice and suffering happening throughout Florida, especially in the “hot spot” ZIP Codes, and take the necessary action to remove state barriers plaguing Florida’s Hispanic community and to provide equitable support to all families and businesses as we recover.

Hispanics have carried Florida’s economy on their backs during this crisis, and now it’s time for state leaders to have their backs and remove these barriers to survival and well-being. For further information about our public policy efforts in the state, please contact UnidosUS Florida State Director Jared Nordlund at jnordlund@unidosus.org.

Sincerely,



Eric Rodriguez
Senior Vice President, Policy and Advocacy
UnidosUS

Jared Nordlund
Florida State Director
UnidosUS

John Martinez
Executive Director
Centro Campesino

Claudia Di Giorgio
CEO
Centro de Ayuda para los Hispanos

Betty Alonso
President and CEO
ConnectFamílias

Liz Gutierrez
Founding CEO
Enterprising Latinas, Inc.

Josephine Mercado, JD
Founding CEO
Hispanic Health Initiatives, Inc.

Maria F. Pinzon
Executive Director
Hispanic Services Council

Josie Bacallao
President and CEO
Hispanic Unity of Florida, Inc.

Sylvia A. Alvarez
Executive Director
Housing & Education Alliance

Steve Kirk
Executive Director
Rural Neighborhoods, Inc.

Marucci Guzman
Executive Director
Latino Leadership

Sources:

- [Title III COVID Sign On Letter](#)
- [CARES ACT BRIEF: EDUCATION & LATINOS](#)
- [Coronavirus Case Rates and Death Rates for Latinos in the United States](#)
- [Power of the Purse: The Contributions of Hispanic Americans](#)
- [Florida: An Economic Overview](#)
- [COVID-19 is exposing Florida's shockingly high number of uninsured Latinx kids](#)
- [Sadowski Trust housing funds will help Florida's 'most vulnerable' now more than ever](#)