

June 24, 2020

The Honorable Greg Abbott
Office of the Governor
State Insurance Building
1100 San Jacinto
Austin, TX 78701

Dear Governor Abbott:

On behalf of UnidosUS (formerly the National Council of La Raza), I write to express concerns about the health and well-being of Latinos* in Texas and urge you to take critical steps necessary to protect families and children. UnidosUS is the nation's largest Latino civil rights and advocacy organization. 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. UnidosUS has had a presence in Texas since its founding as the Southwest Council of La Raza in 1968. Among our national network of nearly 300 community-based Affiliates, 29 provide services throughout the state of Texas, helping to provide health, education, and economic opportunities for more than 11 million Latino and other low-income Texans.

Nationally, the Latino community has experienced disproportionate harm from COVID-19. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Latinos are four times more likely than their White counterparts to be hospitalized for COVID-19, and the weighted death rate for Latinos is 27%, well above their share of the total population. According to the Texas Department of State Health Services COVID-19 Dashboard, currently 40% of COVID-19 cases and 26% of deaths in Texas are Latino. However, nearly 13% of cases and 18% of deaths have reportedly "unknown" ethnicity, suggesting that the rates for Latinos are likely higher. Meanwhile, Latinos in the state make up a large share of essential workers—from food supply to health care—and many are raising children and live with family members at high risk. This combination of factors means that Latinos have greater susceptibility and greater exposure to the virus, and because of preexisting health disparities and economic inequality many workers do not have access to health coverage or economic relief. Because Latinos in Texas may be at severe risk of infection and death, we urge swift targeted action by your administration and have included several recommendations below.

*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.

Improve Race/Ethnic Data Collection

The COVID Tracking Project and the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University created the Racial Data Dashboard (RDD) to provide more accurate data by race and ethnicity to the public.¹ According to the RDD, Texas has reported race and ethnicity data for only 15% of all cases and 26% of all deaths in the state. While culturally relevant rapid responses are needed to pinpoint communities and neighborhoods throughout the state where the virus may be surging, the lack of disaggregated data in the Texas DSHS Dashboard leaves health experts and first responders without this crucial information.

Extend Medicaid to the Uninsured

Thank you for taking action to ensure that working-class families can continue to access health programs like the Texas Children’s Health Insurance Plan (CHIP), Medicaid, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Plan (SNAP). Given the continued public health and economic crises, we urge your administration to take additional steps by increasing access to health insurance coverage for all Texans, and focus enrollment efforts on Latino children and those families with limited English proficiency.

Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the nation, with well more than a million more Texans expected to become uninsured during the pandemic. Prior to COVID-19, 17% of Texans were uninsured, including 26% of Texas Latinos overall² and 14.8% of Latino children.³ In the three months since the beginning of the pandemic, more than 1.6 million Texans have lost their employee-sponsored health insurance. This number will only increase until the pandemic is over. Extending Medicaid coverage to uninsured families would bring not just health care but also security and peace of mind for 1.5 million Texans and 364,000 Latinos who fall into the coverage gap.⁴ We appreciate that Texas has submitted a Medicaid State Plan Amendment to provide coverage for COVID-19 testing and related visits for the uninsured through Medicaid, but the state must go further to cover those that fall into the gap.

¹ The COVID Tracking Project, “Racial Data Dashboard,” <https://covidtracking.com/race/dashboard#state-tx> (accessed June 17, 2020).

² Kaiser Family Foundation, “Uninsured Rates for the Nonelderly by Race/Ethnicity,” <https://www.kff.org/uninsured/state-indicator/rate-by-raceethnicity/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D> (accessed December 12, 2017).

³ Kelly Whitener et al., “Decade of Success for Latino Children’s Health Now in Jeopardy,” UnidosUS and Georgetown University Center for Children and Families, March 2020, <https://ccf.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Latino-Childrens-Health-Care-Coverage.pdf> (accessed March 29, 2020).

⁴ Samantha Artiga, Anthony Damico, and Rachel Garfield, *The Impact of the Coverage Gap for Adults in States not Expanding Medicaid by Race and Ethnicity* (Washington, DC: Kaiser Family Foundation, 2015), <http://kff.org/disparities-policy/issue-brief/the-impact-of-the-coverage-gap-in-states-not-expanding-medicaid-by-race-and-ethnicity> (accessed December 12, 2017).

Relatedly, the state of Texas continues to lead a group of 20 states challenging the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in *California v. Texas* (known as *Texas v. United States* in the lower courts).⁵ If successful, the lawsuit would result in roughly 1.7 million Texans losing their health coverage.⁶ Texas would hardly be better off with nearly two million more uninsured families during a spreading pandemic, and we urge you to reconsider the state's participation in this senseless legal battle.

Protect the Health of Vulnerable Students

As schools reopen in Texas, it is critical that parents and community leaders are engaged by school administrators and leaders in the process. Students also must have access to the necessary supports, including health coverage and care, to be healthy and ready to learn. Latino students, and English learners (ELs) in particular, are experiencing high levels of stress. Parents have lost their jobs or students are afraid that their parents—especially those in essential jobs—could become infected and die. Some students already have family members who are sick or have died. The situation is especially worrisome for those students with one or both parents who are immigrants, and because of their immigration status are ineligible for most forms of emergency aid and assistance. Current estimates are that more than one million American children in Texas have at least one parent who is a noncitizen without lawful status. The majority of ELs are native-born Americans, but because of the citizenship status of one parent may not have access to recovery aid or relief.

Mental health supports are needed to mitigate the risk of social and emotional stress on students' well-being, especially as schools and districts plan for reopening in the fall. Supplemental state funds can help district leaders, teachers, and other education support staff receive training in trauma-informed practices. Additionally, schools need funding for counselors, social workers, and psychologists who can serve ELs' mental health and emotional needs as they transition back to school. Finally, we encourage you to spotlight the needs of English learners and their families, examine the degree of learning loss these children have endured to date, and identify steps to prevent these children from falling further behind.

Direct Funds to Culturally Responsive and Linguistically Appropriate Human Needs Programs

Federal and state relief efforts have been critical, but it is important that all who are eligible for these resources are made aware of resources via a culturally responsive and linguistically appropriate approach. For example, federal funding through Medicaid allows for uninsured citizens to have access to testing, and the Families First Act and the subsequent CARES Act passed by Congress include money for testing individuals regardless of immigration status.

⁵ MaryBeth Musumeci, *Explaining Texas v. U.S.: A Guide to the Case Challenging the ACA* (Washington, DC: Kaiser Family Foundation, March 2020), <https://www.kff.org/health-reform/issue-brief/explaining-texas-v-u-s-a-guide-to-the-case-challenging-the-aca/> (accessed June 16, 2020).

⁶ Linda J. Blumberg et al., "State-by-State Estimates of the Coverage and Funding Consequences of Full Repeal of the ACA" (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2019), <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/state-state-estimates-coverage-and-funding-consequences-full-repeal-aca> (accessed June 17, 2020).

While the Texas Department of State Health Services website (<https://dshs.texas.gov/coronavirus/>) provides information on uninsured citizens' ability to get tested, there is no information listed for noncitizens.

In addition, many families throughout the state are either unaware that they have access to free testing or choose to remain in the shadows, afraid to get tested out of fear that they may be punished via public charge or deported. This fear could be contributing to the spread of the virus in the most vulnerable communities where people have the highest risk factors. As Texas families return to work while the COVID-19 case count rises, more people will get sick. The state needs to do more to inform all Texas families that they have access to the COVID-19 test and that the U.S. Citizenship and Immigrant Services has [clarified](#) that seeking treatment or preventive services for COVID-19 will not negatively affect an individual's future "public charge" analysis. Much of this can be done in partnership with trusted community-based organizations to provide resources and testing in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways.

Call a Special Legislative Session to Address Texans' Needs

The state of Texas is at a pivotal crossroads. As the state slowly reopens, the economic and health recovery will take far longer, especially for Latinos who are living paycheck-to-paycheck, working reduced hours, or—worse—newly unemployed. UnidosUS urges you to call a special legislative session this summer to address the issues that prevent all Texans from a full recovery from the current economic downturn and public health crisis. Recent data showing increases in COVID-19 cases, along with unemployment claims, underscore the urgency of acting now.

Thank you again for the positive steps taken thus far to save lives. We urge you to go further to acknowledge and recognize the efforts of Latino Texans on the frontlines of the pandemic and focus attention and resources on ways to reduce any adverse impact of the crisis on Hispanics in Texas. For further information about our public policy efforts in the state, please contact UnidosUS's Texas Strategist Manuel Grajeda at mgrajeda@unidosus.org.

Sincerely,



Eric Rodriguez
Senior Vice President, Policy and Advocacy
UnidosUS