

Open Government

EMBRACE TRANSPARENCY & DIVERSITY

Legislative leadership is to be commended for its efforts during these most challenging times. With every segment of our society affected by this pandemic, it is imperative that our government is open and transparent giving our citizens a sense of safety and confidence. This crisis has touched every region of our state, and all ethnicities and genders. While COVID-19 doesn't discriminate, it has certainly magnified long held economic and health disparities among people of color in Mississippi and most of the nation.

Frontline workers who we now herald as heroes, continued to provide health care, goods and services to families across this state and they deserve recognition and representation. This virus has laid bare what the organizations signing this document have recognized all along. Many of these people on the frontline pay taxes and have worked hard barely making enough to cover the costs of shelter and food, and could not stay at work without subsidized child care. Many have worked their whole lives without access to health care when they got sick - even while caring for our sick. **The health and safety of these hundreds of thousands of workers who carry the state's economy should be considered priority as the Legislature makes critical determinations about State Supplemental funding over the next several weeks.**

In the coming weeks the Mississippi Division of Medicaid will face increased demands due to the COVID-19 public health emergency. **We call upon the Legislature to immediately streamline enrollment to expedite coverage for eligible families and minimize administrative burden on overwhelmed eligibility workers.** Higher demand and limited staff capacity could result in delayed processing of new applications when coverage is needed the most. It is imperative that pathways and simplifications in the Medicaid application process are expedited, with minimum burdens on eligibility workers and less bureaucratic red tape, while at the same time preserving program integrity.

PUBLIC HEALTH & SAFETY

EXPAND ACCESS TO CARE. We entered this crisis with a beleaguered health care system that left too many Mississippians unable to afford health care and too many rural hospitals struggling to keep their doors open. As you are aware, COVID-19 has brought us to a breaking point. As they seek care, we are hearing that uninsured working families affected by this virus are being faced with balance billing and medical debt. In addition health analysts estimate that with increasing numbers of unemployed, the uninsured population is going to explode in the state. While there is the promise of additional federal resources, these funds would be short-term and fall very short of meeting the needs of these individuals and health care providers.

We call upon the Legislature to enact Medicaid Expansion to protect uninsured Mississippians from crippling medical debt and provides greater funding to rural hospitals. We all understand now how important it is to have a strong health care system. And we should ensure that the very workers we are putting in the line of fire - in health care support, child care,

cashiers, clerks, warehouse and delivery, janitorial, processing and other line manufacturing - gain access to health insurance coverage. This isn't about expanding government, it is about supporting the very Mississippians that have and will soon put their lives on the line as this pandemic continues its assault.

INVEST IN PUBLIC HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE. We call upon the Legislature to provide sufficient funding to continue operations of a Public Health and Contact Tracing System with a particular focus on processing and other assembly line manufacturing plants.

Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) are critical to addressing disparities in the health care system. COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of tele-health in our rural state where specialists are few and many times nonexistent. **We call upon the Legislature to continue tele-health to address disparate populations by allowing FQHCs to bill Medicaid for tele-health services beyond the 2 months covered by COVID-19 federal funding.**

PROTECTING VULNERABLE MISSISSIPPIANS.

We call upon the state Legislature to prioritize personal protective equipment (PPE) for vulnerable communities. It is to everyone's benefit for the state to provide access to gloves, masks, sanitizer and other protective gear to elderly and disabled Mississippians, as well as persons confined in correctional facilities, and persons experiencing homelessness. Particular attention should be given to child care centers coming back online with fewer staff, children, and resources unable to reliably source PPE, cleaning, and professional sanitizing and disinfectant services to keep thousands of children, staff and parents safe across the state and curtail the spread of disease.

EDUCATION & CHILDCARE

PROTECT MISSISSIPPI'S CHILDCARE INFRASTRUCTURE. Many child care providers across the state serve parents in low- to moderate income occupations - such as our frontline workers. These child care centers operated normally on very thin margins. As they come back online due to social distancing, they will not be able to serve as many children, consequently they will operate in or near red until things get back to normal. **We call upon the Legislature to provide grants/subsidies to child care centers in the Child Care Payment Program for at least 6 months or as needed to ensure they are able to remain afloat and support employers of business and industry.**

The child care sector represents more than 1,000 small businesses in the state. Reopening with the number of children, parents and staff involved requires sufficient sanitation supplies and PPE for everyone. Child care centers generally make their purchases from big box stores where they are in competition with the general population securing cleaning, disinfectant, and PPEs. **We call upon the Legislature to fund a stockpile of these supplies for purchase by child care**

centers, and to provide commercial cleaning and sanitizing services at no cost to the centers for the next 6 months.

STRENGTHEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS. We realize that k-12 public school CARES funding was sent directly to the Mississippi Department of Education. However, COVID-19 unearthed the deep inequities that exist in our public school education system, exacerbated by years of underfunding. We now have an opportunity to build a system of education that will prepare all of Mississippi's children for opportunities in the growing technology driven economy of the 21st Century. **We call on the Legislature to invest in long-term planning to ensure all schools and children have access to quality and affordable internet services and devices regardless of where they live or their family income.** This investment should include training for teachers and staff to maintain and upgrade systems. Just as we invest in tele-health, we should consider how to continue long distance learning for our students in rural communities with critical content area teacher shortages. We urge the Legislature to reject use of Title I funding for private schools in contravention of law and with no regard for student need. Title I is premised on support for schools with higher concentrations of students from low-income families. States have the authority to prioritize Title ESEA funding in that way, this is especially urgent as Mississippi school district budgets in low wealth areas reel from the economic impact of COVID-19.

ECONOMIC SECURITY

ADDRESS GROWING FOOD INSECURITY. We see how quickly many Mississippi families have come to rely on food assistance. **We call on the Legislature to direct the MS Department of Human Services to apply for additional months of no-cost emergency allotments from USDA's Food and Nutrition Service in SNAP benefits.** DHS should also ensure easy access to Electronic Benefit Transfers to help families in dire need of food assistance.

HAZARD PAY. We are sending hundreds of thousands of Mississippians into jobs that put them and their families at daily risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus. **We strongly urge the Legislature to provide Hazard Pay to help ease the economic and mental burden these employees face.**

PAID LEAVE. No one should have to choose between their jobs and their health or caring for a family member. Paid leave and fair scheduling protections help ensure employees can meet their work obligations and care and provide for themselves and their families. Workers in restaurant and similar service industries require frequent contact with the public and are among the least likely to have access to paid leave. These protections will improve public health, workforce participation rates, and strengthen Mississippi businesses. **We urge the Legislature to immediately provide 12 weeks of comprehensive, job protected paid family and medical**

leave, and to guarantee at least 14 days of job protected paid sick leave regardless of the size of the employer.

SHIELDING HOMEOWNERS and RENTERS. We call on the Legislature to utilize funding from the CARES ACT to ensure families are not subject to evictions, utility terminations, or foreclosures for at least sixty (60) days following expiration of Mississippi's last Shelter-in-Place order. Emergency funding should also provide shelter for the homeless population, including vouchers for rapid rehousing programs including hotels and motels.

PROTECTING VULNERABLE WORKERS

WORKFORCE PROTECTIONS. As businesses reopen our workforce must be protected. Employees are entitled to a safe work environment and ensuring PPE is critical to workforce safety. **We call on the Legislature to mandate and invest in monitoring large employers' strict adherence to public health standards for cleaning and supplies.** Small employers should be provided PPE as they struggle to stay alive.

ENSURING BALLOT ACCESS

We urge the state Legislature to preserve the fundamental right to vote and to ensure that every eligible Mississippian can safely and securely register to vote. COVID-19 creates unique challenges to casting a ballot in the upcoming 2020 elections.

PERMIT EARLY VOTING and NO EXCUSE ABSENTEE BALLOTS. We urge the Legislature to Expand Early Voting to decrease the number of people in lines on Election Day and all of the social distancing challenges that will require. We also urge the Legislature to make provisions to expand the use of Mail-in Absentee Ballots, including removal of required notary and in-person witnesses. Requiring voters who do not currently meet statutory provisions for absentee voting to vote in person in this ongoing health crisis presents severe burdens to their right to vote.

ALLOW ON-LINE VOTER REGISTRATION. We call on the Legislature to implement a fully automated On-Line Voter Registration system, with the ability to process voter registration applications electronically.

RESOURCE THE OFFICE OF THE MISSISSIPPI SECRETARY OF STATE. Additional staff will be required by the Secretary of State's Office to enact these voter access provisions. **We call on the Legislature to appropriate the necessary resources to the Secretary of State's Office to implement Early Voting, Expanded Mail-In Ballots, and On-Line Voter Registration.**

Respectfully Submitted by,

Children's Defense Fund
Community Health Center Association of Mississippi
Mississippi Black Women's Roundtable
Mississippi Center for Justice
Mississippi Health Advocacy Program
Mississippi Human Services Coalition
Mississippi Low Income Child Care Initiative
Mississippi State Conference NAACP
One Voice
Planned Parenthood Southeast Advocates
Southern Rural Black Women for Economic and Social Justice