

May 25, 2021

The Honorable Gavin Newsom  
1303 10th St., Suite 1173  
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Governor Newsom:

On behalf of UnidosUS (formerly the National Council of La Raza), I write to urge you to immediately take additional action to ensure that California's most vulnerable communities get access to COVID-19 vaccines. According to data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), California's latest seven-day rate of new cases was 32.5 per 100,000—making it the lowest of any state in the nation.<sup>1</sup> Considering the state's fall and winter waves that left Californians in a vulnerable position, officials in California have taken considerable steps to address and contain the spread of COVID-19 and to distribute vaccines equitably. Still, available state data and feedback from community leaders indicate that vaccines remain out of reach for too many of California's residents of color. This letter includes several recommendations to ensure the equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines to the hardest-hit communities, including Latinos as well as immigrants and other communities of color.

UnidosUS is the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization and has built a stronger country by creating opportunities for Latinos for more than 50 years. Through its unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and a national Affiliate Network, UnidosUS simultaneously challenges the social, economic, and political barriers at the national and local levels. UnidosUS California-based Affiliates include 58 community-based organizations that invest more than \$1.8 billion and employ more than 15,000 staff to provide direct services to approximately 1.8 million Californians annually. UnidosUS is headquartered in Washington, DC, and has an office in Los Angeles and staff in Sacramento. Through partnerships, community investments, and state research and advocacy on housing, health, and education, UnidosUS advances opportunities for the more than 15 million Latinos who call California home.

As you know, Latinos have played a critical role in California's efforts to address the pandemic. The majority of Californians working in frontline essential jobs are Latino, Black, and/or immigrants.<sup>2</sup> Essential workers have had no choice but to show up to work, thus risking their lives and the lives of their families to keep Californians fed, housed, and healthy. At the same time, long-standing structural racism and its effects have been exposed and exacerbated, which has left Latinos more vulnerable to the devastating impact of COVID-19: compared to Whites, Latinos are more likely to contract and die from COVID-19 and are more likely to have lost income during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

UnidosUS applauds the state's commitment to equity, yet vaccination rates in our most impacted communities show that more must be done to reach equitable vaccine distribution.

For example, according to a March 2021 CDC analysis, California has one of the most unequal vaccine programs, ranking in the bottom five states in terms of equity of vaccine distribution. Since data were collected for that CDC analysis, California has made notable changes to its COVID-19 vaccine program, including the allocation of [40% of vaccines to the hardest-hit communities](#) in the lowest-income ZIP Codes; additional [funding](#) to vulnerable communities so that health care providers can expand clinics, staff, and weekend and evening hours; and partnering with nearly 200 places of [worship](#). These are all critical steps to ensuring that vaccines reach our most impacted communities.

Still, California's racial and ethnic minorities continue to trail behind Whites significantly in vaccination rates. Hispanics and Blacks are receiving a smaller share of vaccines compared to their rate of cases and deaths and their share of the total population. As of May 12, in California only 32% of Latinos have been vaccinated even though they make up 48% of deaths and 40% of the total population, while 51% of White Californians have been vaccinated.<sup>4</sup> This level of inequity is unacceptable considering that communities of color have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

UnidosUS recognizes and appreciates the administration's commitment to equity, yet more must be done. UnidosUS provides the following recommendations, based on our principles for an equitable distribution of vaccines and input from our network of community-based organizations, to support the state's efforts to get more vaccines to Latinos and other hard-hit communities throughout the state:<sup>5</sup>

- **Assess the effectiveness of and ensure accountability in California's equity policy of allocating 40% of vaccines to the hardest-hit communities.** In early March it was announced that 40% of California's vaccine doses would be prioritized for neighborhoods and ZIP Codes hardest-hit by the pandemic, based on the Healthy Places Index (HPI). While the state continues to allocate 40% of vaccine doses to ZIP Codes showing the most need, there is still a percentage point gap of 22% in vaccination rates between those communities and the highest HPI-ranking communities.<sup>6</sup>
  - ***Enhance collection, disaggregation, and public reporting of data to track disparities and identify what communities need to be targeted.*** Available data show clear disparities in COVID-19 cases, deaths, hospitalizations, and vaccination rates between Latinos and others. Still, those data sets are incomplete, making it difficult to know the true extent of disparities and to facilitate better and more targeted decision-making about the health, social, and economic needs of our communities. The state's current [data sets](#) include vaccination distribution rates for only race and ethnicity, age, and vaccine equity metric (which combines HPI with California Department of Public Health-derived scores). Vaccine distribution efforts must include intentional efforts to enhance disaggregated data collection, analysis, and reporting by additional demographic categories, including by gender identity, primary language, disability status, and other

demographic factors that can be used by community-based organizations to target communities being left behind.

- **Provide additional funding to the hardest-hit communities so that they can address persistent barriers to access.** Equity needs to be at the center of allocating and administering vaccines to ensure that doses get into the arms of our most vulnerable communities. Individuals in vulnerable communities face barriers such as lack of broadband access, transportation, ability to miss work, etc. Targeted and innovative approaches that consider these challenges are necessary to ensure that no one is required to have internet access, a car, a flexible job schedule, or other privileges to receive a lifesaving vaccine. Vaccines targeting vulnerable communities should be made available through low-barrier vaccine sites, including mobile vaccination sites, walk-in appointments, easily accessible sites that do not require transportation, and sites with extended hours and weekend availability to accommodate work schedules. Addressing these barriers comes with additional urgency as many of the 4.3 million Latino youths aged 0–17—just under half of all children in the state—become eligible for the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine.<sup>7</sup>
- **Expand communication and outreach efforts, which is key to reaching Latinos.** All Californians deserve to have the facts on COVID-19 vaccines and to be informed that anyone, regardless of immigration status or access to health insurance, can access a vaccine safely and without cost. In a recent [poll](#) conducted by UnidosUS and Univision News, among the 46% of Latino respondents in California who did not know or did not believe that they were eligible for the vaccine, 34% indicated that they believed they were not eligible because of immigration status, lack of required proof of state residency, or lack of health insurance. Therefore, it is critical that California’s COVID-19 vaccine program prioritizes:
  - ***Uniform guidance that includes intentional messaging for immigrants.*** All advocates and providers should make it clear that the vaccine is free to everyone regardless of immigration status and that receiving a free vaccination will not impact current or future status. Additionally, it should be made clear that no Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or other immigration officials will be present at or near vaccination sites.
  - ***Continued investments in trusted community organizations.*** Community-based organizations—such as UnidosUS Affiliates that provide direct services and resources to support the well-being of Latinos—serve as trusted messengers and influencers for the Latino community. Their role is particularly important amid continuing concerns about the vaccines in various communities, including mixed-status families and the uninsured. Trusted community organizations must be involved in all levels of vaccination planning, education, and delivery to ensure that communities’ specific needs are considered and that workable solutions are implemented. Additionally, smaller grassroots organizations closely connected to hard-to-reach communities are often left out of funding

opportunities due to limited capacity or resources required by grant application and reporting processes while providing direct and urgent services. Therefore, investments in community-based organizations should include a set-aside for smaller grassroots organizations to ensure more equitable access to state funds.

UnidosUS commends the state's decision to prioritize equity when deploying COVID-19 vaccines and urges you to take additional steps so that our most vulnerable communities are not left behind as California fully reopens. We welcome the opportunity to discuss our recommendations with you and to help your administration build on your work to ensure that vaccines equitably reach Latinos—who make up 39% of California's population and more than half of the state's essential workers. Please contact Viviana Martin, Policy Analyst, Policy and Advocacy at [vmartin@unidosus.org](mailto:vmartin@unidosus.org).

Sincerely,



Janet Murguía  
President & CEO

cc: Jim Deboo, Executive Secretary, Office of the Governor  
Priscilla Cheng, Director, External Affairs  
Richard Figueroa, Deputy Cabinet Secretary  
Yolanda Richardson, Secretary, Government Operations Agency  
Dr. Mark Ghaly, Secretary, Health and Human Services

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<sup>1</sup> Luke Money and Rong-Gong Lin II, "In dramatic turnaround, California now has the lowest coronavirus case rate in the U.S." *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-04-26/california-lowest-coronavirus-case-rate-nation> (accessed April 28, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> UnidosUS, *California's Essential Workers and Their Housing Needs* (Washington, DC: UnidosUS, March 2021), [http://publications.unidosus.org/bitstream/handle/123456789/2131/unidosus\\_caessentialworkers\\_housingneeds.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://publications.unidosus.org/bitstream/handle/123456789/2131/unidosus_caessentialworkers_housingneeds.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) (accessed April 28, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Alissa Anderson, *Low-Paid Workers and Their Families Take another Blow as California Begins to Lose Jobs Again* (Sacramento: California Budget & Policy Center, February 2021), <https://calbudgetcenter.org/resources/california-is-losing-jobs-again/> (accessed April 28, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Nambi Ndugga et al., *Latest Data in COVID-19 Vaccinations Race/Ethnicity* (San Francisco: Kaiser Family Foundation, May 12, 2021), <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/latest-data-on-covid-19-vaccinations-race-ethnicity/> (accessed May 13, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> UnidosUS, *The COVID-19 Vaccines and the Latino Community: Principles for an Equitable Distribution* (Washington, DC: UnidosUS, April 2021), [http://publications.unidosus.org/bitstream/handle/123456789/2149/unidosus\\_principlesforequitabledistribution.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y](http://publications.unidosus.org/bitstream/handle/123456789/2149/unidosus_principlesforequitabledistribution.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y).

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<sup>6</sup> *Los Angeles Times* Staff, "Tracking coronavirus vaccinations in California," *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/projects/california-coronavirus-cases-tracking-outbreak/covid-19-vaccines-distribution/> (accessed May 13, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Population Reference Bureau, *KidsData: Hispanic/Latino Children in California* (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2021), <https://www.kidsdata.org/export/pdf?dem=17> (accessed May 20, 2021).