

November 30, 2021

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Re: Meeting request regarding equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines for Hispanic children and families in Florida

Dear Secretary Ladapo and Administrator Bass:

On behalf of UnidosUS (formerly the National Council of La Raza), I write to **request a meeting with you to discuss UnidosUS's recent survey findings and recommendations to improve equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines for Florida Hispanic children and their families.**¹

As you know, the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting every aspect of the well-being of Florida's children and families. It's also clear that the state of Florida has a responsibility to keep children and families safe from the virus. Yet the state's inconsistent messaging on vaccines, alongside the politicization of mask usage and vaccination, and a recent convening of a Special Session against vaccine requirements, are creating a polarized environment around COVID-19 mitigation efforts. Such efforts are critical for the state to recover from the pandemic, especially with a threat of another COVID-19 wave with the Omicron variant.

¹ 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. The UnidosUS Florida-based Affiliates include 17 community-based organizations that invest more than \$113 million and employ more than 3,200 staff to provide direct services to approximately 130,000 Floridians annually. UnidosUS is headquartered in Washington, DC, and has an office in Miami and staff in Orlando. Through partnerships, community investments, and state research and advocacy on housing, health, and education, UnidosUS advances opportunities for the more than six million Latinos who call Florida home and are present in 27 Florida counties.

The COVID-19 vaccines remain the strongest and most critical protection against COVID-19. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF), more than half (57%) of Florida Hispanics have received a COVID-19 vaccination,² including Hispanic children. As of November 10, [nearly one in four \(23%\)](#) of COVID-19 deaths in Florida are among those who identify as Hispanic. (This figure could be higher, since 3,738 of reported COVID-19-related deaths [do not include ethnicity data](#), according to Florida’s Department of Health.)

Risks for infection are also increasing for Hispanic children who are back in school and remain unvaccinated.^{3,4} As noted in our recent [letter](#) to Commissioner Corcoran, pediatric cases of COVID-19 in Florida also skyrocketed since June 2021.⁵ Nationally, more than five million children have tested positive for COVID-19.

We enclose a Florida-specific fact sheet regarding a recent poll that we conducted among Latino parents. It reveals key lessons for those seeking to increase vaccination rates among Latino children and families, including barriers to vaccination faced by Latino parents.^{6,7} Key findings from the poll include:

- Florida’s Hispanic parents today feel even more concerned than they did last year about COVID-19’s impact on their family, and support policies that would improve their family’s health and financial well-being.
- Health care professionals are key messengers to close vaccination and information gaps among Hispanic parents in Florida who are concerned about the vaccine’s safety and side effects on children.
- Financial costs and accessibility concerns weigh heavily on Floridian Hispanic parents when thinking about getting themselves and their children vaccinated. For these reasons, Latino parents support policies and approaches to reduce barriers and increase access to vaccines.
- A majority of Florida’s Hispanic parents support vaccine requirements in a wide range of settings.

Two recent publications by UnidosUS offer actionable insights and guidance to close vaccination gaps in the Latino community:

2 Ndugga, N. et al., “Latest Data on COVID-19 Vaccinations by Race/Ethnicity,” Kaiser Family Foundation. October 6, 2021, <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/latest-data-on-covid-19-vaccinations-by-race-ethnicity/>, (accessed October 19, 2021).

3 Reyes, E.A., and Rong Gong Lin II, “COVID-19 cases rising among unvaccinated youth, Latinos in L.A. County,” Los Angeles Times, August 26, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-08-26/covid-cases-los-angeles-county>, (accessed September 20, 2021).

4 Hodgson, Ian. “Florida kids still lead all ages in positivity as COVID cases fall,” Tampa Bay Times, October 19, 2021, <https://www.tampabay.com/news/health/2021/10/19/florida-children-lead-all-ages-in-positivity-despite-drop-in-covid-cases/>, (accessed October 20, 2021).

5 UnidosUS, “Florida Letter on Equitable State Allocations of American Rescue Plan Education Funds,” October 7, 2021, <https://www.unidosus.org/publications/florida-letter-on-equitable-state-allocations-of-american-rescue-plan-education-funds/>, (accessed October 20, 2021).

6 UnidosUS, “Florida Hispanic Parents’ Concerns Over Vaccine Access for Children,” October 2021, https://www.unidosus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/unidosus_ehfa_floridakeyfindings.pdf, (accessed November 17, 2021).

7 UnidosUS, “Majority of Latino Parents Support Vaccine Requirements for Kids, Educational Staff to Return to In-Person Schooling,” <https://www.unidosus.org/press-releases/majority-of-latino-parents-support-vaccine-requirements-for-kids-educational-staff-to-return-to-in-person-schooling/>, (accessed October 4, 2021).

- [*Seizing the Moment: Recommended Approaches for Equitable Distribution of COVID-19 Vaccines in the Latino Community*](#). This paper provides actionable insights on how localities are promoting vaccinations in the Latino community.⁸
- [*The COVID-19 Vaccines and the Latino Community: Principles for an Equitable Distribution*](#). This paper provides a guide for state and local leaders to address and mitigate the racial and ethnic disparities in access to COVID-19 vaccines to ensure the nation fully recovers from the pandemic.⁹

Given the barriers that Hispanic parents in Florida face in vaccinating themselves and their children, and the recent authorization of vaccines for children, and building on UnidosUS’s previous letter to Governor DeSantis, **we offer the following recommendations to improve the equitable distribution of vaccines in the state.**¹⁰

1) Be intentional about the equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines for children.

- **Create a COVID-19 vaccination plan designed to increase equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines for children and their families.** Following the CDC’s [recommendation](#) that children between the ages of five and 11 be vaccinated against COVID-19, Florida’s Department of Health should develop and implement a vaccination campaign that reaches an estimated 1.7 million children in Florida newly eligible for the vaccine.¹¹ Such a plan should follow guidance from the CDC’s Pediatric COVID-19 Vaccination Operational Planning [Guide](#) on establishing partnerships between local education, health departments, and community-based leaders to build trust and raise awareness among communities, including the Hispanic community, disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 about the availability of COVID-19 vaccines for children.^{12,13}
- **Partner with the Florida Department of Education to ensure that the state’s COVID-19 vaccination plan addresses the mental health needs of children impacted by COVID-19.** COVID-19 has been traumatic for millions of children and families. According to our [poll](#), nearly one in four (24%) Hispanic parents in Florida was infected with COVID-19, close to half (45%) had a close family or household member infected, and more than one in five (21%) lost a loved one due to the virus. Nationally, more than 140,000 children have lost a parent or

8 UnidosUS, “Seizing the Moment: Recommended Approaches for Equitable Distribution of COVID-19 Vaccines in the Latino Community,” <https://www.unidosus.org/publications/seizingthemoment/>, (accessed October 4, 2021).

9 UnidosUS, “The COVID-19 Vaccines and the Latino Community: Principles for an Equitable Distribution,” <https://www.unidosus.org/publications/2149-the-covid-19-vaccines-and-the-latino-community-principles-for-an-equitable-distribution/>, (accessed October 8, 2021).

10 UnidosUS, “UnidosUS Letter to Florida Governor DeSantis on Equitable Vaccine Access,” April 7, 2021, https://www.unidosus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/unidosus_lettertoflgov_vaccinationequitysignon_4721.pdf, (accessed October 20, 2021).

11 Hodgson, I., “Experts explain why kids ages 5 to 11 should get the COVID vaccine,” Tampa Bay Times, November 5, 2021, <https://www.tampabay.com/news/health/2021/11/03/experts-explain-why-florida-kids-5-to-11-should-get-covid-vaccine/>, (accessed November 30, 2021).

12 University of Miami Health System and Miami-Dade County Public Schools, “Miami-Dade County Public Schools partners with the University of Miami Health System Pediatric Mobile Clinic to offer COVID-19 testing, school-required vaccines and the COVID-19 vaccine to eligible students,” July 20, 2021, <http://pdfs.dadeschools.net/featured/2021/UM-PEDIATRIC-MOBILE-CLINIC-072021-VACCINE-SCHEDULE-REVISED.pdf>, (accessed October 24, 2021).

13 Cowan, K., “Hillsborough County school district hosting vaccine clinics for students,” Fox 13 Tampa Bay. June 11, 2021, <https://www.fox13news.com/news/hillsborough-county-school-district-hosting-vaccine-clinics-for-children>, (accessed October 24, 2021).

caregiver to COVID-19. As the Florida Department of Health works to develop a targeted vaccination campaign to reach Florida children, the Agency should partner with the state's Department of Education to incorporate strategies, such as those reflected in the U.S. Department of Education's recent mental health [resource](#), to support child social, emotional, and behavioral health.

2) Make information about vaccines easily accessible.

- **Target investments to fund Spanish-language community-based outreach and awareness campaigns** to disseminate information and messaging on vaccines for children. Communication and information to raise awareness about the availability of vaccines for children must be available in families' home languages and conveyed in a manner that is culturally relevant, to help families better understand, support, and continue to advocate for their children. UnidosUS's *Esperanza* Hope for All (EHFA) Mobile Educational Tour serves as a model approach for the state to invest in bringing information about vaccines into Latino neighborhoods.¹⁴

3) Expand data collection and reporting by race and ethnicity.

- **Invest in disaggregated data collection, analysis, and reporting by race and ethnicity for children.** Data on COVID-19's impact on Florida's children and adolescents are limited, making it difficult to know the true extent of disparities and facilitate better decision-making about the health, social, and economic needs of our communities. Yet available data from the CDC show that Latino children are more than three times as likely to be hospitalized for COVID-19 than are non-Hispanic white children.¹⁵ For these reasons, state vaccination campaigns must include intentional efforts to enhance disaggregated data collection, analysis, and reporting by specific demographic categories, such as age, race, ethnicity, gender identity, primary language, disability status, and other demographic factors.

4) Reduce structural barriers to vaccine access.

- **Issue guidance to vaccine providers and state and local governments** to clarify that Social Security numbers, government-issued identification, and other documentation are not required for parents to receive a vaccination for themselves or their children. The CDC's COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force has made public their position that U.S. citizenship is not a

¹⁴ UnidosUS, "Esperanza Hope for All Mobile Educational Tour," <https://www.unidosus.org/esperanzahopeforall/mobiletour/#ehfa-mobile-tour-dates>, (accessed October 7, 2021).

¹⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "Disparities in COVID-19-Associated Hospitalizations

Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities," <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/racial-ethnic-disparities/disparities-hospitalization.html>, (accessed September 20, 2021).

requirement to receive a vaccine.^{16,17} Yet close to two in five (38%) of Hispanic parents in Florida surveyed had to pay a co-pay/fee, provide proof of insurance, or present a government-issued identification in order to have their child vaccinated. Further clarifying guidance is needed to ensure that vaccination sites do not turn away Hispanic parents and their children who may be noncitizens, live in mixed-status households, or lack a government-issued identification.

- **Encourage county officials to partner with local health care agencies to expand accessibility to COVID-19 vaccines for working parents.** According to UnidosUS's poll, nearly six in 10 (59%) of Hispanic parents in Florida said that more flexible hours at vaccination locations would help a great deal in making it easier for them and their community get vaccinated. Notably, [Miami-Dade County](#) is working closely with health care partners and local health departments to hold vaccination drives during the evening hours in order to reach and vaccinate members of our community, including those who work in the tourism/hospitality industry, against the virus.
- **Develop an Employer Vaccination Toolkit** to include suggested best practices for employers that reduce barriers and increase access to vaccines for workers with children. According to our poll, Latino parents continue to experience barriers to vaccination for children, including having to schedule shots around their work hours and concerns about having to miss work.

We hope you share our sense of urgency about the importance of effective strategies to increase vaccinations in the Latino community. UnidosUS and its Affiliates welcome the opportunity to partner with you to share key learnings about proven approaches that would help all Florida Hispanic children and families in assuring their equitable access to vaccines.

We would appreciate meeting with you to discuss these and related issues. Please reach out to UnidosUS's Florida State Director Jared Nordlund at jnordlund@unidosus.org to find a convenient time.

Sincerely,

Jared Nordlund
Florida State Director
UnidosUS

CC: The Honorable Ron DeSantis, Governor, State of Florida
The Honorable Richard Corcoran, Commissioner, Florida Department of Education

16 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "COVID-19 Vaccines Are Free to the Public," <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/no-cost.html>, (accessed 9.20.21)

17 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "CDC COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force Position on Citizenship and Residency," CDC, May 3, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/citizenship-residency-position.html> (accessed October 7, 2021).