

October 23, 2020

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Governor
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Dane Eagle
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The Honorable Jeanette Nuñez
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Ruth Dillard
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RE: Florida's Reemployment Assistance Program

Dear Governor DeSantis, Lieutenant Governor Nuñez, and Directors Eagle and Dillard:

As you are aware, the administration of unemployment benefits in Florida has failed jobless workers. New data from a poll commissioned by UnidosUS, previously known as NCLR (National Council of La Raza), illustrates the degree to which Latinos¹ in Florida have been negatively impacted financially as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. On behalf of UnidosUS and the Hispanic-serving organizations or leaders below, I urge you to take action to transform Florida's Reemployment Assistance system to better serve Latinos and all workers.

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.

Unemployment benefits are a financial lifeline

On the frontlines of the health and economic calamity caused by the coronavirus are Latino workers, who are overrepresented in the tourism and service industries, and gig worker jobs, which have been among the hardest hit by the economic downturn. A recent poll by UnidosUS on Latino unemployment, conducted by Latino Decisions July 14–24, 2020, found that 60 percent of Florida’s Latino households have suffered two or more forms of lost income, such as a pay cut, loss of a job or gig work, or closure of their small business. Moreover, 56% of Latino voters in Florida responded that they or someone in their household have spent most or all of their savings, 40% are struggling to pay for food and medicine, 39% are falling deeper into debt and maxing out their credit cards, 37% have had to depend on food banks, and 35% have sold personal belongings in order to pay their bills.

Since the July expiration of the \$600 weekly federal enhancement in unemployment benefits, those figures are likely to get worse: 60% of Latino households in Florida responded that they will not be able to pay for necessities without the enhanced benefits.

Improving access to unemployment benefits is crucial.

The DeSantis Administration can take steps to improve access to benefits for unemployed Latino workers. The UnidosUS survey found that 45% of unemployed Latinos in Florida did not apply for jobless benefits. Forty-four percent said they did not do so because they believed that they don’t qualify—which is true in some cases but a mistaken belief in many others. For example, more than half of respondents thought they couldn’t apply if they work in the gig industry, even though gig workers are eligible for the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program.

Making matters worse, getting assistance from Florida’s Department of Economic Opportunity is a real challenge. Twenty-six percent of unemployed Latino Floridians said they didn’t apply for jobless benefits because the process is too complicated. Majorities of those who did apply and sought help in-person or by phone experienced hours-long wait times and disconnected calls, and ultimately never got to speak with anyone who could answer questions about the process for filing claims. Among those who applied online, less than a quarter (23%) said they were successful in getting their applications approved on the first try. Whether they applied online, in-person, or by phone, 43% indicated that there is insufficient information offered in Spanish to understand and complete the application process. For those applicants who finally

succeeded in getting their claim filed and approved, 70% said they had to wait a month or longer to receive their unemployment benefits.²

These factors are further exacerbated by the fact that immigration status shuts many Latino workers in Florida out of unemployment benefits altogether and excludes them from food assistance, the direct stimulus payments that were disbursed in the spring, and other state and federal programs.

Considering that Latinos comprise 27 percent of Florida's population, removing barriers to the economic security and upward mobility of all Latino households is critical to achieving the economic recovery that all Floridians want and need.

The UnidosUS poll findings underscore the important role of unemployment benefits in helping families make ends meet, as well as the multiple unnecessary barriers that prevent Latino workers from accessing them.

In an effort to improve Florida's Reemployment Assistance program, below we present several recommendations.

- **A culturally relevant application process** in which applicants can successfully apply online, by phone, or in-person on their first attempt and receive help in a timely manner in their preferred language. This should include hiring more bilingual Hispanic and Haitian Creole-speaking staff in the Department of Economic Opportunity across frontline, management, program-design, and decision-making positions.
- **Increased public awareness** so that Latino workers know what types of benefits are available, whether they are potentially eligible to apply, and when benefits expire. This will require a linguistically and culturally competent campaign, deploying earned and paid media and grassroots outreach, which reaches Latino workers through the information platforms they use as well as Latino-serving community organizations.
- **Extension of the current waiver on the "work search" requirements until after the public health emergency is over.** The pandemic has made it increasingly challenging for Floridians to search for—and provide proof of their search—for new jobs. As such,

² [UnidosUS/Latino Decisions July 2020 Poll Results: Experiences with Income Loss and UI Benefits During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Latinos in Arizona, Florida, and Texas.](#)

Florida has waived the work search requirement, until December 5, 2020 for individuals filing an application for benefits. Through the waiver, applicants currently do not need to provide five work search contacts for every week of benefits or answer questions about ability and availability to look for work for the weeks of unemployment claimed. Waivers, including the work search log, should be extended until 60 days after the nationally declared public health emergency ends.

- **Leadership in advocating at the federal level for a long-term solution following receipt of FEMA assistance to administer supplemental payments for lost wages.** On August 29, 2020, Florida was approved for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grant for Lost Wages Supplemental Payment Assistance from the Disaster Relief Fund (DRF). Since approved, Florida may administer supplemental payments for lost wages, up to \$300, to those receiving at least \$100 in unemployment insurance compensation. This funding is finite, and we are concerned about these funds being depleted from the DRF when we are barely halfway through hurricane season. Floridians who lost wages need you to advocate for a long-term solution that does not depend on the DRF and “repays” FEMA for money used.
- **The State should provide support to unemployed Floridians who do not currently qualify for existing state or federal programs due to their immigration status.** Immigrants have helped fuel our economy during good times, as reported by the Florida Legislature’s Office of Economic and Demographic Research. Letting them fall deeper into poverty now will not serve the interests of the communities in which they live or the state as a whole.

We welcome the opportunity to work with you in addressing these challenges. UnidosUS Florida State Director Jared Nordlund is available at jnordlund@unidosus.org to answer any questions and provide your administration with additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Eric Rodriguez', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Eric Rodriguez
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Karina Pavone
Executive Director, Amigos for Kids

Marcos Vilar
Executive Director, Alianza Center

Zelalem Adefris
Vice President of Policy & Advocacy, Catalyst Miami

John Martinez
Executive Director, Centro Campesino

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Executive Director, Rural Neighborhoods, Inc.

cc: Marco Rubio, United States Senate
Rick Scott, United States Senate
Bill Galvano, Florida Senate President
Kathleen Passidomo, Florida Senate Majority Leader
Audrey Gibson, Florida Senate Minority Leader
José R. Oliva, Speaker of the Florida House of Representatives
Kionne McGhee, Florida House Minority Leader