

March 29, 2021

The Honorable Nikki Fried  
Commissioner  
Florida Department of Agriculture and  
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**RE: Immediate Actions to Address Child Food Insecurity in Florida**

**Dear Commissioner Nikki Fried, Directors Erin Moffet and Lakeisha Hood:**

On behalf of UnidosUS, (formerly the National Council of La Raza), I write to thank you for your efforts to respond to the pandemic and urge you to take modest additional steps to respond to the pandemic's impact on Hispanic and Black Floridians. [UnidosUS](http://UnidosUS) is the nation's largest Hispanic<sup>1</sup> 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.

While Florida has taken some important steps to respond to COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the Hispanic and Black community, more work is needed at the state level to address the immediate needs of these

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

families who continue to experience high rates of food insecurity. Months into the pandemic, [more than 20%](#) of Florida Latino households with children reported not having enough food to eat. For these reasons, we ask that you use your authority to act on the following:

**Implement Culturally Responsive and Linguistically Appropriate Public Awareness Campaigns on P-EBT and Child Nutrition Programs.** We thank you for submitting Florida’s P-EBT plan for the 2020-21 school year. We are also thrilled that the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 extends P-EBT benefits for the duration of the public health emergency and provides benefits during the summer. P-EBT remains critical to ensure that more than two million Florida children who lost access to free or reduced-price meals due to school and child care closures can eat. Given that COVID-19 continues to exacerbate food insecurity among [Florida Hispanic and Black children](#), we urge you to work with the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) and the Department for Children and Families (DCF) to develop and execute a robust public information campaign on P-EBT that reaches eligible Spanish- and Haitian Creole-speaking households. We ask that you collaborate with community-based partners, local DCF offices, and school districts to ensure P-EBT benefits reach every eligible family, including mixed-status families. While the vast majority of Hispanic children in Florida are citizens (91%), nearly half (49%) live in mixed-status households.

**Work with FLDOE to increase outreach about applying for free and reduced-price lunch.** Unprecedented job losses due to COVID-19 have pushed family budgets to the limit, leading many households with children to become newly eligible for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). [Our poll](#) on unemployment last year, conducted by Latino Decisions July 14–24, 2020, found that 60% 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. In addition, the fragmented school reopening plans this school year with regard to remote or hybrid-learning settings have made it more challenging to ensure school meals reach those students who need it most. According to FLDOE, approximately 54.4%<sup>2</sup> of all PK-12 students in Florida are identified as “economically disadvantaged.” These are students who rely on NSLP for food and may be struggling to access food if their school is closed due to the public health emergency.

Limited language access services and inadequate outreach prevents many eligible Hispanic and Black Floridians from participating in food assistance programs, including NSLP and P-EBT. An intentional, culturally competent public outreach campaign to increase enrollment in NSLP and P-EBT will also achieve the following outcomes: improved identification of students who would benefit from P-EBT and more accurate data on which Florida schools are eligible or nearly eligible for Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). These outcomes would ensure that students are able to flourish in school without going hungry.

**Work with U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) and Florida Congressional Delegation to Extend Nationwide Child Nutrition Waivers Permanently.** We are thrilled that USDA recently announced that it would [extend](#) child nutrition waivers for summer meals through September 30, 2021. While the extension is an important step to fill meal gaps, more work is needed to ensure more children and families can access healthy food beyond the pandemic. These waivers must be extended permanently to address rising rates of food insecurity and avoid confusion or unnecessary concerns among eligible children and families. COVID-19’s impact on schools, working families, the economy, and food insecurity will last well beyond September. We ask that you work closely with the

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<sup>2</sup> PK-20 Portal, Enrollment. Florida Department of Education, Division of Accountability, Research and Measurement, Bureau of PK-20 Education Reporting and Accessibility. Tallahassee, FL, 2021, <https://edstats.fldoe.org/SASPortal/public> (accessed February 23, 2021)

Biden administration and Florida congressional delegation to extend these waivers to swiftly address Florida's food insecurity crisis. Extending the child nutrition waivers permanently will ensure that the growing number of children at risk of hunger can access the nutrition they need regardless of their remote- or hybrid-learning setting.

**Call on the Florida Congressional Delegation to Support School Meals for All Children.** We commend you for [advocating for H.R. 7887](#), the "Pandemic Child Hunger Prevention Act," during the 116th Congress. With growing unemployment, increasing uncertainty surrounding the school year, and rising food insecurity among Latino households, policies that expand free school meals are vital to keeping children from going hungry during these unprecedented times. [Close to 60%](#) of Latinos in Florida are concerned that their children or those of close family members will have trouble accessing free or reduced-price school meals. We ask that you write a letter to the Florida congressional delegation in support of policy solutions that increase access to school meals and maximize upcoming opportunities, such as Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization, to expand the P-EBT Program, invest in the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (Summer EBT) Program, and build on the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010.

We commend you for working to address the food insecurity crisis hitting working families across the state. We recognize that the long-standing disparities evident in Florida will only get worse unless leaders at the state and federal level implement policies that strengthen child nutrition programs proven to make all Floridians, including Hispanic and Black Floridians, healthier. For this reason, the undersigned ask that you continue to maximize existing state flexibilities authorized by USDA and collaborate with federal policymakers to expand child nutrition programs to the fullest extent possible to ensure that all children and families have access to healthy food. We welcome the opportunity to work with you in addressing food insecurity among Florida's children and families. **UnidosUS Florida State Advocacy Director Jared Nordlund** is available at [jnordlund@unidosus.org](mailto:jnordlund@unidosus.org) to answer any questions and provide FDACS with additional information.

Sincerely,



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