

December 7, 2021

The Honorable John Hellerstedt, MD
Commissioner
Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS)
1100 West 49th Street
Austin, TX 78756-3199
Email: john.hellerstedt@dshs.texas.gov

Antonio Aragon
Director, Immunization Unit
Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS)
1100 West 49th Street
Austin, TX 78756-3199
Email: antonio.aragon@dshs.texas.gov

The Honorable Mike Morath
Commissioner
Texas Education Agency (TEA)
1701 N. Congress Avenue
Austin, TX 78701
Email: commissioner@tea.texas.gov

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

Dear Commissioner Hellerstedt, Director Aragon, and Commissioner Morath:

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 Texas Hispanic children and their families.**¹

¹ UnidosUS is the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization and has built a stronger country by creating opportunities for Hispanics for more than 50 years. The UnidosUS Texas-based Affiliates,¹ led by Avenida Guadalupe Association and Project Bravo, Inc., include 28 community-based organizations that invest more than \$775 million and employ more than 6,200 staff to provide direct services to approximately 240,000 Texans and challenge the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Hispanics in Texas. UnidosUS is a primary recipient of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s Partnering with National Organizations to Increase Vaccination Coverage Across Different Racial and Ethnic Adult Populations Currently Experiencing Disparities. Through this opportunity, UnidosUS funds three sites in Texas, including Centro de Salud Familiar La Fe (El Paso), Project VIDA Health Center (El Paso), and Su Clinica Familiar (Harlingen), to improve vaccination coverage and to identify and implement strategies to reduce racial and/or ethnic disparities in adult vaccination coverage.

Unquestionably, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact every aspect of the social and emotional health and economic well-being of Texas’s children and families.

It’s clear that the state of Texas 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 [state ban](#) against vaccine requirements are creating a polarized environment around COVID-19 mitigation and public health prevention efforts. Such efforts are critical for the state to recover from the pandemic.

COVID-19 vaccines remain the strongest and most critical protection against COVID-19 and its variants. Certain regions of Texas, such as El Paso where a significant number of Hispanics reside, have high vaccination rates that have contributed to lower rates of COVID-19 infections compared to the rest of the state.² According to the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF), more than half (56%) of Texas Hispanics have received a COVID-19 vaccination, including Hispanic children.³ However, Hispanics comprise the largest percentage of COVID-19 cases in Texas. As of November 19, 2021, more than one in three (37%) of COVID-19 cases and more than four in 10 (43.7%) of COVID-19 deaths in Texas are Hispanic.⁴ (This figure could be higher, since 14% of reported COVID-19-related cases [do not include ethnicity data](#), according to the Texas DSHS.)

Risks for infection are increasing for Hispanic children who are back in school and remain unvaccinated.⁵ Nationally, more than five million children have tested positive for COVID-19. With the recent emergency authorization of the Pfizer vaccine for children ages five to 11, we have an opportunity to expand our reach and protect the health and well-being of children living in Texas.

We enclose a Texas-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 Hispanic children and families, including barriers to vaccination faced by Hispanic parents.^{6,7} Key findings from the poll include:

2 Harper, K. Brooks, “The delta variant is wreaking havoc on most of Texas – but not El Paso. Here’s why.” The Texas Tribune. September 13, 2021, <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/09/13/coronavirus-texas-el-paso/>, (accessed December 3, 2021).

3 Ndugga, N. et.al., “Latest Data on COVID-19 Vaccinations by Race/Ethnicity,” Kaiser Family Foundation. December 2, 2021, <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/latest-data-on-covid-19-vaccinations-by-race-ethnicity/>, (accessed December 3, 2021).

4 Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS), “COVID-19 Coronavirus Disease 2019,” DSHS COVID-19 Dashboard, November 19, 2021, <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/45e18cba105c478697c76acbbf86a6bc>, (accessed November 24, 2021).

5 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).

6 UnidosUS, “Texas Hispanic Parents’ Concerns over Vaccine Access for Children,” October 2021, https://www.unidosus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/unidosus_ehfa_texaskeyfindings.pdf, (accessed October 20, 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).

- Texas’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 Texas who are concerned about the vaccine’s safety and side effects on children.
- Financial costs and accessibility concerns weigh heavily on Texan Hispanic parents when thinking about getting themselves and their children vaccinated. For these reasons, Hispanic parents support policies and approaches to reduce barriers and increase access to vaccines.
- A majority of Texas’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:

- [*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 helps guide 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 Texas face in vaccinating themselves and their children and the recent authorization of vaccines for children, we offer the following recommendations to improve the equitable distribution of vaccines in the state.

1) It’s important to be intentional about the equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines for eligible children, adolescents, and their families. Steps should include:

- **Creating a COVID-19 vaccination plan designed to increase equitable and timely access to COVID-19 vaccines for children and their families.** Following the CDC’s [recommendation](#) that children between the ages of five and 11 can be vaccinated against COVID-19, Texas DSHS should develop and implement a vaccination campaign that is tailored to meet the unique needs of young children. Such a plan should follow guidance from the CDC’s Pediatric COVID-19 Vaccination Operational Planning [Guide](#) on establishing partnerships between local education,¹⁰ health departments, and community-based leaders to build trust and raise

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 November 24, 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 November 24, 2021).

10 Texas Education Agency, “COVID-19 Support: Public Health Orders,” <https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/health-safety-discipline/covid/covid-19-support-public-health-orders#vaccinations>, (accessed December 3, 2021).

awareness among communities, including the Hispanic community, disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 about the availability of COVID-19 vaccines for children.

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.¹¹

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 Texas'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.¹² 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 requirement to receive a vaccine.^{13,14} Yet, more than one in three (37%) of Hispanic parents in Texas 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

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

12 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).

13 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 November 24, 2021)

14 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 November 24, 2021).

their children who may be noncitizens, live in mixed-status households, or lack a government-issued identification.

- **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, more than four in 10 (42%) of Hispanic parents in Texas experienced difficulties during the process of having their children vaccinated, including scheduling vaccine appointments around their work schedule.¹⁵

We hope you share our sense of urgency about the importance of effective strategies to increase vaccinations among the Hispanic community. UnidosUS and its Affiliate Network of community-based organizations, including federally qualified health centers, welcome the opportunity to partner with you to share key learnings about proven approaches that would help all Texas 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 Texas Strategist Manuel Grajeda at mgrajeda@unidosus.org to find a convenient time.

Sincerely,



Rita Carreón
Vice President, Health
UnidosUS

CC: The Honorable Greg Abbot, Office of the Texas Governor
The Honorable Dan Patrick, Office of the Texas Lieutenant Governor
Speaker Dade Phelan, Texas House of Representatives

¹⁵ UnidosUS, "Texas Hispanic Parents' Concerns Over Vaccine Access for Children," October 2021, https://www.unidosus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/unidosus_ehfa_texaskeyfindings.pdf, (accessed October 22, 2021).