



March 18, 2020

Dear Governor Lujan Grisham, Attorney General Balderas, Chief Justice Nakamura, Speaker Egolf, Senator Papen, Mayor Keller, Mayor Webber, Mayor Hull, and Mayor Miyagishima:

We write to urge and recommend immediate action to protect our local communities as we confront and attempt to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19. As you know, **there will continue to be sudden and sustained reductions in labor and income that will cause severe financial strain for many New Mexicans and especially for our state's low-income families.**

Public health is our shared priority. Economic insecurity is itself a public health issue. Having the money and resources to support your family, access a safe place to live, and other basic necessities are prerequisites to ensuring you can stay at home when you are sick, as well as care for your family and community.

We commend our government officials and state leaders for taking expedient initial steps to mitigate the harm families will face. This includes waiving job search and work availability requirements for unemployment benefits, making meals available for families with children who rely on school lunches for daily meals, and prohibiting insurance carriers from imposing out-of-pocket costs for testing and treatment related to COVID-19.

But much remains to be done. Our state's response must focus on and involve the communities already experiencing economic inequality and are likely to face the harshest health, housing, family and economic impacts.

The undersigned advocacy organizations work with and for communities across New Mexico. As we face this crisis together, we urge you to exercise your emergency powers to contain the spread of the coronavirus and protect the wellbeing of all New Mexico families. We collectively urge you to take the following measures:

Protect Workers

- **Enact emergency paid sick leave and pass local paid sick leave ordinances that guarantee paid sick leave for all workers.** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is urging sick workers to stay home. But many workers do not receive paid sick leave from their employers and cannot afford to go without their pay.

- **Eliminate the one-week delay in unemployment benefits.** Currently workers have to wait a week before they start to receive their unemployment benefits. Many workers cannot afford the delay.

Ensure Economic Security

- **Create a new emergency income assistance program.** Reduced wages could lead to a negative cycle of reduced demand for goods and services. To avoid a downward economic spiral, elected officials should provide immediate emergency assistance to backfill lost income during this crisis. A new statewide emergency income assistance program could utilize the existing unemployment benefit infrastructure—that would cover any reduction in work income, not just loss of employment. At a minimum, New Mexico could waive the requirement that adults be disabled to receive General Assistance benefits.
- **Stay wage garnishments and bank levies in the courts.** With imminent and large-scale reductions in income, we must ensure that families have access to their entire paychecks so that they can purchase necessities like food and household supplies.
- **Streamline access to Medicaid, SNAP, TANF, and GA** for workers who have lost their jobs by allowing enrollment when they file for unemployment insurance.
- **Extend eligibility, suspend work requirements and sanctions, and delay all public benefits recertification that cannot be done automatically (Medicaid, SNAP, TANF and GA).** The state is already waiving job search requirements for unemployment. They must do the same for TANF and SNAP related work requirements.

Healthcare for All

- **Provide for immediate access to healthcare through Medicaid.** Expand statewide presumptive eligibility for all Medicaid applicants to expedite enrollment for New Mexicans experiencing financial hardship during this public health emergency.
- **Raise awareness in immigrant communities** that screening and treatment for COVID-19 do not impact “public charge” determinations and will not have immigration consequences.
- **Ensure hospitals and clinics are safe spaces** for all New Mexicans regardless of immigration status by providing guidance to hospitals on best practices.
- **Require employers maintain the health insurance benefits of their employees** regardless of reduction of work hours resulting from the pandemic. This applies equally to government employers.
- **Call for a federal amendment to the Medicaid statutes to add a state option to extend coverage to the uninsured** for all medical services in connection with COVID-19.

Moratorium on Evictions, Foreclosures, Towing, and Utility Shut Offs

- **To keep people housed, stay all court eviction and foreclosure proceedings, including writs of execution.** A moratorium on evictions would ensure that families can avoid work if necessary to self-quarantine and that COVID-19 does not lead to an increase in homelessness in New Mexico. We strongly support the statements released by New Mexico Legal Aid, the New Mexico Access to Justice Commission, the New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness, and our congressional delegation calling for a statewide moratorium on evictions. We commend city leaders who have already taken quick action to protect their residents by issuing emergency proclamations prohibiting eviction of tenants whose inability to pay has been adversely affected by this public health emergency. We strongly encourage other city leaders to follow suit. At a minimum, we need a statewide stay on all evictions in public and subsidized housing. **State and local governments should create a rent relief fund to help impacted families** and should provide residents with sufficient time to catch up on back rent after the crisis subsidies. Our leaders should also encourage banks to step up and provide mortgage payment relief.
- **Stop all utility shut offs.** Loss of income will cause many families to fall behind on bills and risk having their water, gas, electricity, and other basic utility services shut-off. The impacts of utility shut-offs are severe in a crisis requiring people to be at home with water to wash their hands. Require all private and public utilities doing business in our state to halt shut offs, including internet and cell phone companies, which are critically important channels to access accurate and timely public health information.
- **Place a moratorium on towing vehicles.** People who have to stay inside should not have to risk losing their primary asset, or get saddled with fines and fees that quickly surpass the vehicle's value.

Include all New Mexicans in the Response to this Crisis

- **Protect New Mexicans without homes by providing emergency resources to shelters** so they can: institute social distancing; provide accommodations for people without homes to self-quarantine; institute emergency quarantine; set up portable wash stations; and increase health care outreach. Distribute hand sanitizer to unhoused people and information about avoiding and preventing Covid-19. Provide medical care on-location to people who are unable or unwilling to enter hospitals.
- **All local governments must reaffirm their institutional commitment to all immigrant community members** who may be targets of xenophobic behavior.
- **Courts should take all necessary steps to protect community health by reducing the number of people in custody.** We support the New Mexico Law Office of the Public Defender's call to release nonviolent defendants and people serving sentences for nonviolent offenses and to suspend arrests and detention for nonviolent offenses, failures to pay fines or fees, technical violations of release or probation, or other violations that do not immediately impact public safety. Youth should not be quarantined in carceral settings.

We thank you for your leadership. Working together to implement each of these actions will mitigate the impact of COVID-19 across our state and especially in communities that will experience the deepest economic impacts.

Sincerely,

Organizations

New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty
Forward Together, Strong Families New Mexico
Lutheran Advocacy Ministry - New Mexico
New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness
New Mexico Voices for Children
NM Comunidades en Acción y de Fé - CAFé
Health Action New Mexico
United South Broadway Fair Lending Center
Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP)
Catholic Charities - Archdiocese of Santa Fe
New Mexico Social Justice Equity Institute
McKinley Co. Assn. of Retired Educators

Individuals

Jo Ann Benenati
Ruth Rhoad
Rachel Kaub
Anne Nolan
Patricia Sheely
Tammy Parker
Kathleen Mezoff, M.D.
April Forman
Terrence W. Sloan, M.D.
Terence M. Gurley
Carol Sarath
Deanna Crask
Gerald A. O'Hara