

**2020 NORTH CAROLINA LEGISLATIVE SESSION:**

**Responding to COVID-19 with Compassion and  
Commitment to Strengthening  
Well-Being for All**



**The North Carolina General Assembly has an important role to play** in developing a robust and sustained response to the public health and economic crisis brought on by COVID-19.

**We believe it is critical for lawmakers to find agreement** on how best to meet community needs now and to also set forward a long-term vision that will advance people’s well-being in the recovery from this public health and economic crisis.

**This legislative agenda lays out the principles and policies** that must guide our state’s first response to this pandemic while also identifying where underlying systemic changes are needed to ensure a recovery is both equitable and leads to resilience. We recognize that needs are changing, and the policy context is developing rapidly as well. There is no doubt that the federal government has a critical role to play as the state and country recovers from this unprecedented crisis. This agenda will also need to adapt to changing needs and circumstances as time goes on.

**As North Carolinians across the state struggle** with health scares, job loss, school closures, and great uncertainty, our policymakers’ leadership can show they are working for everyone’s well-being. They can also recognize their unique responsibility to build supports so that every person — white, Black, and brown — can achieve financial security and fully participate in civic life, strengthening our state for generations to come.

**The North Carolina Justice Center’s shared principles and values  
for our state’s COVID-19 response**

- First, **legislators must center people most harmed** by the virus and its ripple effects in the policies and public investments proposed by the state;
- Second, **legislators should conduct assessments of how their policy choices will impact people and address proactively the disproportionate**
- **harm of COVID-19**, particularly on communities of color, and in so doing design solutions to achieve equitable outcomes; and
- Finally, **legislators should advance solutions that build durable, efficient systems** to achieve greater resiliency in the future.

► **Here is our agenda of public policies that need action from our General Assembly:**

**Protect the health of North Carolinians and contain the spread of the coronavirus**

- **Invest in the state’s public health infrastructure** to ensure local departments have the necessary and substantial additional resources to widely test and monitor new cases, and establish the infrastructure and public capacity to conduct meticulous contact tracing.
- **Ensure every North Carolinian can access COVID-19 and related information important for their health and safety** by disseminating accurate and accessible facts about how individuals can protect themselves from the virus, access up-to-date information, and understand and exercise their rights through multiple channels, non-digital formats, public and non-profit institutions.
- **Ensure any individual, regardless of insurance status, is able to get testing and treatment for COVID-19, free of cost**, and that individuals with complex and chronic conditions are able to also access care, given their increased vulnerability to the new coronavirus.
- **Expand Medicaid** to ensure more North Carolinians have access to quality, affordable health insurance.
- **Address food insecurity to promote health and well-being by filling in the gaps in the current response** and specifically:
  - Apply for D-SNAP, which provides supplemental food assistance during declarations of emergency
  - Ensure the federal Pandemic-Electronic Benefit Transaction is eligible to all families who qualify
  - Provide state-level food assistance to those families reached by current programs, including a substantial infusion of funding for the state’s food bank system
- Provide the Department of Social Services with the funding to align programs to ensure efficient and timely delivery of food assistance in this context by ramping up on-line application functions, staffing case management, and creating connections across databases to identify eligible and unenrolled families in support



- **People must be able to take time off from work to care for themselves or loved ones without fear of losing their job.** North Carolina should ensure those not covered by the federal leave program can access emergency paid sick days and paid leave to take the time needed to care for themselves or for loved ones. In the long-term, North Carolina should create a paid leave insurance program at the state level to make sure that workers take time off when they are sick or need to care for loved ones.
- **Provide additional funds for exigent child and protective services** response capacity, support for homeless and domestic violence shelters, and child care and foster care emergencies.
- **Provide funds for rural hospitals and underserved communities** to meet enhanced telehealth, transportation, and critical service needs.
- **Enhance capacity for the Department of Public Health to meet the rapidly escalating and prolonged demand for behavioral health and crisis services.**

## Support North Carolinians who have lost their job or income

- **Reform the NC Unemployment Insurance System to support those who have lost their jobs due to COVID-19:**
  - Repeal multiple waiting weeks for benefits.
  - Re-establish option for employers to file Attached Claims.
  - Increase weekly benefit amount by adopting a formula that uses the highest quarter wages or the average of the two highest quarters rather than a formula *no other state uses*.
  - Increase maximum benefits amount from \$350 per week.
  - Establish Work-Sharing Option for employers.
  - Increase duration from 12-20 weeks to 26 weeks.
  - Increase the Earnings Allowance/Disregard so more part-time workers can qualify for benefits.
- **Connect all North Carolinians with cash assistance:** The federal Economic Impact Payment is a critical support to families during this time, but it may not be accessible to all North Carolinians, minimizing its benefits to stabilize the state economy. To make sure North Carolinians receive these federal dollars and to fill the gaps in the program's reach:
  - Fund outreach through non-profit organizations, existing referral resources like 211 and NC CARE 360, and the Department of Social Services to provide information about the Internal Revenue Service non-filer portal and guidance on setting up accounts to receive payments
  - Provide state funds to support an emergency cash assistance program so that people who can't access the federal program can stay at home and pay rent.
- Increase the state's Work First benefit level to 50 percent of Fair Market Rent as it was in 1995 to ensure families with very low incomes have the support needed to meet basic needs
- Enact state-level refundable Earned Income Tax Credit to provide workers earning low wages with support to make ends meet and offset their higher sales tax load.
- **Support stable, affordable housing so that every person has a place to safely stay-at-home:**
  - **Create a rental assistance fund** to ensure tenants who face financial hardship can pay rent and stay in their home, limit rent increases during the pandemic, and prohibit evictions for non-emergency reasons.
  - **Dedicate Community Development Block Grant and Emergency Solutions Grant dollars to communities** with high rates of homelessness and housing cost-burden to provide Housing Support Services and alternative housing to non-congregant shelters.
  - **Increase investment in the "Back At Home" program** that was instrumental in addressing housing insecurity during past hurricane disasters.
  - **Restart the NC Foreclosure Prevention Program** for homeowners with low incomes who for no fault of their own cannot make mortgage payments.



## Protect frontline and essential workers who are at risk

- **Provide every worker on the job who cannot work from home with personal protective equipment (PPE)** to reduce their risk of contracting and spreading the coronavirus. PPE should be available to those working in health care as well as those working in child care centers, grocery stores, and occupations deemed essential, particularly for staff working in close proximity to large groups of people.
- **Mobilize state economic development programs to boost emergency PPE production and address the PPE shortage to ensure the safety of workers on the job.** Modify the state's economic incentive programs Job Development Investment Grant (JDIG) and OneNC to invest in boosting PPE production from current PPE companies and those related businesses that can be repurposed to produce PPE.
- **Ensure frontline and essential workers receive hazard pay** equal to at least time and a half in recognition of the risks they face and the need to keep them safe from elevated COVID-related hazards on the job.
- **Require the NC Department of Labor (NCDOL) to respond to COVID-related complaints about unsafe working conditions and conduct inspections to protect workers.** No worker should face exposure to COVID due to the negligence of their employer. NC DOL should require employers follow CDC Guidelines for COVID.
- **Require social distancing at all essential businesses, including meatpacking facilities, both on the production floor and in the break rooms.** Require provision of PPE to workers in these facilities.
- **Require the following safety and health requirements be in place before migrant housing may be certified by NCDOL and to direct the department to revoke any certifications if the following do not exist:**
  - An emergency plan is in place as outlined in the March 26th DHHS guidance
  - Beds are no closer than 6 ft. away from each other
  - Bathroom(s) with privacy barriers between toilets are in the housing, not only outhouses
  - High-speed internet access
  - Washing machines
- **Mandate breaks and handwashing facilities for all essential workers.**
- **Require that transportation provided by employers ensures social distancing.**



## Support the state's public education system

**Early education** has been deemed an essential service. In addition to the policies above, the following policies are critical to stabilize the system and ensure access for families in need:

- **Remove the parent co-payment** required of families with low incomes in order to receive child care assistance.
- **Reimburse all child care centers open during the pandemic at the state market rate for the child care subsidy program** if higher than their current county reimbursement rate.
- **Establish a grant program to support child care centers** that have lost revenue and closed to cover the cost of rent, utilities, and administration so that they can be ready to re-open, and the state won't see the accessibility of child care further worsen.

**The state’s public K-12 system** is continuing to serve children through the end of the school year and needs resources and flexibility to support the sound, basic education of every child. To support the Local Education Agencies, schools, and staff:

- **Provide Local Education Agencies** with funding that has the maximum amount of flexibility to ensure districts can address the wide variety of needs they are facing around school nutrition, childcare, sanitation, protective equipment, child care, remote learning, and language access supports. Ensure resources are available to accommodate students with disabilities and learning differences.
- **Provide School Calendar flexibility** to help make up for lost time and increase after-school and other forms of instruction outside the regular day.
- **Connect all children eligible for Free and Reduced lunch to Pandemic EBT cards** to access food, including those newly eligible, and provide support to schools and food banks to ensure all those eligible apply.
- **Close the digital divide for students** by
  - funding technology infrastructure in schools, laptops and tablets, and expanding broadband infrastructure, particularly in low-income and rural communities (not just in schools), including through innovative use of school busses to provide connectivity in neighborhoods.
  - **Provide school districts enhanced budget flexibility and class size waiver capacity** to allow districts to best meet the needs of their students in recovering lost learning time from the 2019-2020 academic year and in planning for the re-opening of schools in the summer of 2020 for the 2020-21 academic year.



**Support the state’s post-secondary institutions—UNC and community colleges**

- **Make sure students have the support to continue their education** by removing the time-limit on state financial aid access, remove the limit on access to child care subsidy for students with children, and provide laptops and hotspots to students receiving state financial aid so that they can continue their coursework.
- **Increase funding for student support staff**, often called Education Navigators, at each community college to provide connection to food, housing, and other supports.

**Create a framework for the justice system to support social distancing, reduce economic harms, and promote public safety**

- Provide for jails and prisons to support social distancing by:
  - Isolating elderly and other at-risk people in the prison system from staff and other imprisoned people and releasing at-risk individuals from state custody through expanded use of commutations, parole, and discretionary change in place of confinement pursuant to GS 148-4.
  - Significantly increase medical services in prisons and jails.
  - Increase staffing to state agencies providing crucial services and that are already understaffed, especially the state prison system and Department of Motor Vehicles—otherwise there will be huge pressures for

sick employees to go to work and thereby interact with people in prison.

- Increase the capacity of virtual visits to prisons, jails, and other state agencies.
- Limit unnecessary travel between prisons—for example, the DMV mobile units should be discontinued for the next three months or done virtually.

- **Provide representation to people with low incomes** to support their access to services and supports by funding the state’s indigent defense system and Legal Aid of North Carolina, as well as Pisgah Legal Services and Charlotte Center for Legal Advocacy.



### Advance equitable economic stabilization strategies

- **Fund a small business support program** of at least \$75 million that is designed to reach small businesses, in particular those not able to access the federal programs with a specific priority placed on Historically Underutilized Businesses, businesses providing essential services like child care centers, and underbanked businesses.
- **Provide local governments not receiving direct local aid from the federal government** with support to meet COVID-19 expenses and stabilize their budgets for the next fiscal

year by providing increased options to raise revenue locally, providing grants for COVID-19 expenses at levels aligned to Tiers, or taking over the share of local responsibilities for existing expenditures.



- **Expand the NC Office of Recovery and Resiliency with the staff and funding** to address this statewide emergency.

### Ensure transparency and inclusion in the policymaking process and protect the right to vote

- **Ensure state and local governments can align with public meetings and open government law** without putting people’s health at risk, including making sure processes are in place to hear from constituents and working consistent with open meetings law virtually.
- **Provide transparency in funding allocations of all federal dollars to state and local governments** including state appropriations, funding directed to state agencies and provided to local budgets, and equity consideration in distribution formulas.
- **Fund U.S. Census outreach** in the state to target counties with low-response rate and communities with harder to reach groups.

- **Fund State Boards of Elections** with the required \$2.2 million match needed to draw down federal dollars and provide additional funding as needed to supply absentee ballots, purchase secure drop boxes, pay poll workers, and update technology to provide free, fair, and accurate elections.
- **Ensure every person can exercise their right to vote** by adopting on-line registration and vote by mail options.
- **Provide accurate information in multiple languages and formats** including on-line, in mailings, and through trusted non-profit channels about available programs and services.

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