



March 31, 2020

Speaker Tim Moore
16 West Jones Street
Room 2304
Raleigh, NC 27601

RE: Recommendations for the House Select Committee on COVID-19

Dear Speaker Moore,

Thank you for the opportunity to recommend policy priorities that will support our state's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The 76 undersigned organizations from across North Carolina deeply appreciate your service in a time of crisis, and your proactive response by convening the House Select Committee on COVID-19. Together we urge you to act swiftly to enact policies that will ensure the well-being of our state's children and their families, and help us all to recover as quickly as possible once the crisis is over.

While our state has certainly experienced challenging times before, we have never been asked to rise to a challenge of this magnitude. We are in a time of unprecedented danger, to our health and economy, and we ask that your legislative actions be proportional to the dire challenge before us.

We respectfully submit the following priorities for children and families, and urge you to enact them as quickly as possible:

- 1. Enact a \$125 million *Child Care Emergency Economic Support Package*, put forth by the NC Early Education Coalition, to assure the availability of emergency child care and prevent the collapse of North Carolina's early education system.**

Child care is an essential service for thousands of children and families, and is particularly crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic. Funding is needed now to ensure that the child care sector survives intact, so that North Carolina's parents are able to get back to work when this crisis passes.

Fewer than half of North Carolina’s licensed child care programs are still open. A recent survey by the National Association for the Education of Young Children¹ found that approximately one third of programs nationwide report that they would not survive a closure of more than two weeks without significant financial assistance. We support the full recommendations of the Child Care Emergency Economic Package,² and we urge the NC General Assembly to move swiftly in appropriating funding.

2. Ensure that children and families are not hungry by appropriating emergency funding, and waiving restrictions for food relief programs during this public health crisis.

Our state must ensure that pregnant women, infants, children, and parents with young children at home – have ready access to critical health and nutrition programs. Before this pandemic hit North Carolina, one in five children faced hunger on regular basis, and more than 800 babies died before their first birthday each year. Without access to nutritious food, the lives of tens of thousands of infants and children in North Carolina are at risk. We urge the NC General Assembly to:

- **Appropriate at least \$6 million** to Feeding Carolinas and the state farmer’s markets to ensure food banks can meet increased need.
- **Remove the prohibition for state lawmakers to pursue a waiver of SNAP requirements in times of economic distress** so that North Carolina can ensure struggling families are able to put food on the table without time limits.
- **Close loopholes in benefit access for recently unemployed workers.** Specifically, expand the suspension of SNAP work requirements during the emergency period to recipients who were scheduled to be removed from the program before April 1st.

3. Enhance North Carolina’s technology infrastructure to enroll and provide relief services virtually and efficiently.

During this public health crisis, when person-to-person contact endangers the lives of children, families, and public employees, North Carolina’s public agencies must be able to provide

¹ National Assn for the Education of Young Children, “[Child Care in Crisis: Understanding the Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic](#),” March 2020

² NC Early Education Coalition “[Child Care Emergency Economic Support Package](#),” March 2020

services virtually, including application and enrollment in life-saving programs. To achieve this goal, we urge the NC General Assembly to:

- **Allocate funding for NCDHHS** to strengthen the online application process for public benefit programs. The NC FAST system needs to be upgraded in order to achieve this, with NCCARE360 also upgraded to integrate referral services. The NC General Assembly should direct NC DHHS to estimate the amount needed, and then provide funding as quickly as possible.
- **Increase access to broadband internet by eliminating existing state restrictions on local government investments in broadband infrastructure.** Put in place a system to allow counties and municipalities to build out broadband infrastructure and then lease it to a private provider, ensuring equal access to emergency public benefits as enrollment and eligibility processes move online.

4. Protect the safety of children and youth involved in the foster care system.

North Carolina is charged with ensuring the safety of the 12,000 children in foster care. These are children who have experienced significant trauma. During this crisis, they are at heightened risk of increased anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and are much more vulnerable to human trafficking. During this crisis, the child welfare system needs emergency funding to support foster families who have lost their jobs or can no longer work, and to build the technology capacity among social workers, foster families, and foster youth to ensure children's safety.

For each of the recommendations below, we urge the NC General Assembly to direct NC DHHS to estimate the amount needed, and then to provide funding as quickly as possible.

- **Direct NCDHHS to aggressively pursue every federally available waiver and program allowance for the child welfare system, and communicate these changes with urgency and clarity to county agencies and provider programs.** Such waivers include (but are not limited to) virtual visitation for children in foster care, temporary suspension of relicensing requirements for foster parents, and the continuation of Board payments for youth in foster care 18-21 regardless of education and employment requirements.
- **Allocate funding to enable virtual child welfare visitation and virtual court hearings, including tools for social workers, children and families (including foster families).**

- **Keep children in stable foster care homes by allocating direct cash assistance for foster families who may be unemployed or unable to work due to school closures.** Federal stimulus checks are based on 2019 tax filing, and foster families may not receive financial assistance reflecting the actual number of children in their care.

5. Ensure that the 110,000 NC children on NC Health Choice get uninterrupted health coverage during this crisis, and cut red tape by merging NC Health Choice with Medicaid.

During this public health emergency, the federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act provides for continuous, uninterrupted eligibility for more than one million children on Medicaid in NC. Regrettably, in North Carolina the 110,000 children who are age six and older will not receive the same protection because they are enrolled in NC Health Choice (NC's version of the public Children's Health Insurance Program or CHIP).

Thus, we are asking that the NC General Assembly direct NC DHHS to immediately pursue a CMS waiver to ensure uninterrupted coverage to these children. In addition, the General Assembly should direct NC DHHS to submit a waiver request to merge the two programs, as 21 other states have already done. The 110,000 children on NC Health Choice represent just 1.5% of the state's expenditures on public health insurance. Thus, the fiscal impact of a merger would be minimal, and would cut red tape, bureaucracy, and administrative confusion for health care providers and families.

Finally and critically, we join the NC Health Care Association, Care4Carolina, and hundreds of health systems and business leaders across the state in calling on the NC General Assembly to immediately:

6. Do everything in your power to cover North Carolina's uninsured, including accepting the federal funds to expand the NC Medicaid program.

COVID-19 is unlike any health crisis our state and country has experienced before. Over a million people in North Carolina are facing a pandemic with no health insurance whatsoever. The financial impacts may be devastating for families, and for our hospitals and health systems.

You have the power to cut the number of uninsured in half immediately, using federal funding. Expanding Medicaid now will bolster our health systems and families against this pandemic, and create a glide path towards economic recovery when this crisis is over. **Your action would immediately unlock \$3 billion in federal funding to North Carolina's health systems to fight COVID-19 and promote economic recovery.**

Thank you for your work, and for the opportunity to share these recommendations with you. We stand ready to assist you with further information and support regarding all of the areas discussed above. You can reach any of the undersigned organizations by contacting me directly at admin@ncchild.org and 919-834-6623.

Sincerely,

Michelle Hughes, Executive Director
NC Child
Raleigh, NC

A Better Chance A Better Community (ABC2)
Chester B. Williams, CEO
Enfield, NC

A Safe Place Child Enrichment Center Inc
Kimberly Shaw, President
Raleigh, NC

Advocates for Medically Fragile Kids NC
Elaine Nell, Co-founder
Pfafftown, NC

Ahoskie Pediatrics
Beverly Edwards, MD/Owner
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American Association of University Women-North Carolina
Dr. Margie Maddox, Chair NC Public Policy Committee
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American Association of University Women, Orange-Durham Branch
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Cambridge Academy
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Child Care Services Association
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Child First
Diane Britz, NC Regional Clinical Director
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Children First/Communities in Schools of Buncombe County
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Asheville, NC

The Children's Alliance of Mecklenburg County
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Children's Center of Northwest NC
Robin Testerman, Executive Director
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Children's Collaborative of Buncombe County

Sarah Vial, Chair
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Children's Home Society of NC

Jamaica Pfister, Director of Business Development and Advocacy
Statewide

Church Women United—Wake/Raleigh

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Communities Supporting Schools of Wayne County

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Cone Health Foundation

Susan Shumaker, President
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Council for Children's Rights

Heather Johnson, Executive Director
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Creative Play Preschool

Shanita Beard
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Culture and Language Childcare

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Equality North Carolina

Ames Simmons, Policy Director
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Evolve Early Learning

Corrie Price, Director/Founder
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First United Methodist Child Development Center

Janice Price, Director
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Foster Village Charlotte

Sloan Crawford, Cofounder
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The Goddard School Brier Creek

Fathema Matcheswala
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The Goddard School Chapel Hill

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Health Care Justice NC

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Interfaith Initiative for Social Justice

Ron Katz
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John Rex Endowment

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Justice Kids Academy

Malaysia Prince, Director
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KidsNeed2Parents (KN2P)

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Learning Together

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LIFESPAN Inc

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Little Believers Academy

Cassandra Brooks, Owner
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**Maggie's Outreach Community Economic
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Ophelia Ray, CEO
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MomsRising

Beth Messersmith, NC Senior Campaign
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Mountain Community Health Partnership

Tim Evans, Director of Business
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**National Association of Social Workers,
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Valerie Arendt, Executive Director
Raleigh, NC

**National Federation of Families for
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Dr. Lynda Gargan, Project Manager
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**National Prevention Science Coalition to
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Diana Fishbein, Director
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**NC Association of Community Development
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NC Early Education Coalition

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NC Justice Center

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NC Pediatric Society

Elizabeth Hudgins, Executive Director
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NC Coalition Against Domestic Violence

Sherry Honeycutt Everett, Legal and Policy
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North Carolina PTA

Harold Dixon, President/Executive Director
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New Beginnings

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Warrenton, NC

New Hanover County NAACP

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New Hanover County Resiliency Task Force

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Noah's Ark Children's Center at Masonboro Baptist

Tracy Brewer, Director of Children and Families
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North Carolina Alliance for Health

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North Carolina Council of Churches

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NC National Organization for Women

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Prevent Child Abuse NC

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United Voices for Education

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Young Explorers Family Childcare Home

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