

OPPORTUNITY AGENDA



As our country braces for the impacts of coronavirus, growing attention has focused on how uniquely vulnerable Florida is to these coinciding public health and economic crises. With millions of people lacking paid sick leave and affordable health care, a large elderly population, and millions who work in the hospitality or tourism industries, many families are headed toward catastrophe.

The state has taken some important initial steps to slow the spread of the virus, but bold, immediate action is needed to protect working families across Florida from the imminent economic fall-out.

We are asking Governor Ron DeSantis and the Florida legislature to consider these emergency measures to protect Floridians:

- Requiring Florida employers to provide paid sick leave**
- Expanding family and medical leave**
- Expanding Medicaid**
- Lowering prescription drug costs**
- Expanding access to affordable health coverage**
- Expanding access to testing and treatment**
- Creating emergency consumer protections**
- Expanding food stamps and other benefits**
- Expanding unemployment insurance**
- Creating a State Earned Income Tax Credit**
- Repealing the corporate refund**
- Strengthening voting access**
- Calling a special session to address these issues**

More detail on each of these measures is outlined below. We thank you for your service to our state during this difficult time.

Sincerely,

Opportunity for All Floridians
The Common Ground Project
Faith In Public Life
Miami Freedom Project
SEIU FPSU
Parents Together
Florida Voices for Health
Florida Policy Institute

Measures to Protect Floridians in Response to COVID-19:

Paid Sick Days

Congress just passed legislation to extend 10 days of paid sick leave to more workers nationwide. However, the bill doesn't apply to companies with more than 500 employees, and firms with fewer than 50 employees can also request exemptions – leaving millions of workers without coverage. Florida should work to immediately close this loophole and implement a mandate of 14 days of paid sick leave for all employers with more than 50 employees.

Emergency Family and Medical Leave

Illness isn't the only thing threatening to put a strain on Floridians and their families. The closure of public schools and senior centers will also put massive pressure on working people to provide care for family members. Congress passed a bill extending emergency paid leave to parents caring for a child due to school closings. Employers should be mandated to allow eligible employees to take up to 20 days of emergency leave (paid or unpaid) if they have coronavirus, are quarantined, or are caring for someone with the disease without the risk of losing their job.

Medicaid Expansion & Retroactive Eligibility

Access to affordable health insurance is critical to financial stability and recovery from this public health crisis. Expanding Medicaid will help hundreds of thousands of Floridians who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid, but too little to qualify for a Federal subsidy to purchase insurance through the marketplace. Increasing access to affordable health insurance by expanding Medicaid draws down federal money that comes directly from our tax dollars – like 37 other states have already done. We should put this money to work in our state to help as many Floridians as possible get the coverage they need in the face of this global pandemic. Finally, Florida should request to reinstate retroactive Medicaid eligibility to prevent major payment disruptions to hospitals and clinics and financial burdens on consumers as employer coverage losses take place.

Lower Prescription Drug Costs

For families already struggling to afford care, the extra financial hit of coronavirus will mean many families can no longer afford lifesaving medication. We ask the state to create an independent authority, the Prescription Drug Affordability Board, that has the power to set affordable limits on what Floridians pay for their medications, investigate how high prices impact Floridians, and give lawmakers and the public greater insight into how drugs are priced. Florida should also act to protect consumers from price gouging that may occur when prescription drugs to treat or vaccinate against COVID-19 become available.

Access to Affordable Health Coverage

Health care coverage is now more critical than ever, and the people most likely to rely on individual coverage – gig workers, self-employed contractors – may be the ones hit hardest by the immediate economic impact of the pandemic. We ask that the state request the federal government open a special enrollment period on the federal health care exchange. And we urge the state to immediately expand the grace period allowed for premium nonpayment and require that insurance take effect immediately, rather than the start of the next month.

Access to Testing and Treatment

All Florida licensed health insurers providing individual and group health insurance plans, health maintenance organizations, and state health plans should waive all cost sharing requirements associated with COVID-19 medical care and testing. Also, until the Legislature approves Medicaid expansion, Florida should extend temporary Medicaid eligibility to fund coronavirus screening and treatment for the state's poorest residents; if/when a vaccine becomes available, coverage should be required for all eligible children under Medicaid's screening, diagnosis, and treatment benefit, as well as for all adults enrolled in Medicaid. Finally, we ask you to opt Florida into obtaining 100% federal Medicaid reimbursement for COVID-19 testing for the uninsured, following legislation passed by Congress.

Emergency Consumer Protections

Some communities across the state have already begun suspending eviction and utility shut offs to protect vulnerable people during this economic crisis. Florida should follow their lead and immediately implement a statewide moratorium on foreclosures, evictions, and utility shut offs for six months. Further, the state should urge phone carriers and internet providers to waive late fees and suspend service cut-offs, as some companies already have, throughout this crisis.

Expanding Food Stamps and Other Benefits

An economic crisis will quickly become a food security crisis for our most vulnerable community members, including millions of struggling seniors on a fixed income and working families already living paycheck to paycheck. We ask the state to:

- Increase funding for food banks.
- Expand the number of delivery sites for food assistance across Florida.
- Relax eligibility requirements and streamline enrollment for access to food stamps and public programs providing nutrition support, including extending Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to school-age children who would otherwise receive free or reduced-cost school meals, permitting telephone applications, and expanding SNAP to allow purchases of hot foods.
- Provide supplemental SNAP benefits to participating SNAP households.
- Utilize \$16 million in unspent Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds to create special coronavirus programs, relaxing eligibility and work requirements, that will allow families to access basic needs e.g. medical supplies & disinfectants as well as food.

Expansion of Unemployment Insurance

Florida has one of the lowest wage replacement rates in the country despite high costs of living. Our unemployment system is strained in the best of times, with the online system often unable to keep up with demand and many benefits denied outright due to the complexity of filing. Although Congress passed a bill expanding federal unemployment insurance, those benefits will expire in July – we must take urgent action at the state level to expand access to unemployment benefits, as we are already seeing record numbers of applications in the wake of this economic crisis. Florida should:

- Restore the duration of benefits to 26 weeks.
- Increase the current maximum benefit amount from \$275 per week to a level that accurately reflects the cost of living in Florida and the magnitude of this economic collapse.

State Earned Income Tax Credit

A State Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) program supports the financial stability of low and moderate income workers – those hardest hit by economic downturns – by reducing their tax burden, allowing them to get back more of what they earn. We urge Florida to create a state EITC program.

Repeal the Corporate Refund

In 2018 and 2019, the legislature walked away from over half a billion dollars in new revenue by voting for automatic refunds of corporate taxes paid by big corporations, if collections were above a certain threshold. These automatic refunds are scheduled to be distributed in May 2020. Economic downturn threatens our families and small businesses and will likely mean revenue shortfalls in the Florida budget. We ask the state to repeal these unnecessary refunds to increase much-needed state revenue, and to put that money to work expanding the social safety net and funding programs that support vulnerable families during this crisis.

Strengthening Voting Access

COVID-19 is a stark reminder that we must do more to strengthen access to voting even during public health crises. We urge the state to adopt voting reforms to expand vote by mail participation and extend early voting sites with more polling sites and hours, and to provide the necessary funding to implement these initiatives quickly and fairly.

Call for a Special Session

Convene a special session to address emergency issues related to COVID-19 when conditions are safe.