



THE FLORIDA SENATE

SENATE DEMOCRATIC OFFICE

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Audrey Gibson
Democratic Leader

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April 21, 2020

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Governor, State of Florida
Office of the Governor
The Capitol
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Dear Governor DeSantis,

We write to you today to address several issues of increasing concern to our constituents, the residents of the great state of Florida. Some of these issues involve ministerial duties of the Executive branch, while others require Legislative action. Each of these issues are time sensitive and involve matters that deeply impact the lives of Floridians and need to be handled now in a proactive manner to protect the interests and rights of our citizens.

There are a few matters that can be remedied by Executive action. First, the ability of individuals and families to support themselves in the midst of the economic shutdown and related layoffs is of most pressing concern. Our State continues to struggle mightily with the unemployment compensation system. Thousands of Floridians cannot fully access the system or otherwise complete their applications. Those who have been able to file have not yet received their first installment of benefits and therefore lack resources to even feed their families. Today the AP reported that Florida is the slowest state in the country in processing unemployment claims. Moreover, Florida ranks close to last in both duration and amount of benefits paid. Fortunately, the CARES Act provides additional, much-needed funds for unemployed Americans, but those benefits have not yet been received by the vast majority of eligible claimants. We renew our call for the State to fix this system and to begin processing and approving claims expeditiously so that Floridians may receive the help and support they so desperately need. We also call for an Executive Order that expands benefit payments for needy Floridians above the current paltry \$275/week. Florida benefit amounts need to be increased in addition to use of the CARES Act funding that adds \$600/week in benefits. Finally, we call for an Executive Order expanding eligibility for benefits to the date of unemployment, rather than the date of application, for any termination of employment occurring on or after March 1.

Next, food availability, distribution and insecurity are all serious concerns. Fears over this pandemic have caused a sudden and significant increase in demand for food essentials. Labor shortages and logistical constraints that have resulted in fruits and vegetables withering on the

BILL GALVANO
President of the Senate

DAVID SIMMONS
President Pro Tempore

vine. Over the past week we have heard that many farmers are plowing over crops that they cannot harvest or otherwise process for distribution due to economic struggles caused by COVID-19, while other food supplies are wasting away because of a reduced capacity for distribution. Some of this is caused by a drastic reduction in demand from restaurants and hotels. Meanwhile, many Floridians have lost income and have turned to local food banks and food drives. These groups have been attempting to fill the needs of hungry families, but their limited resources and supplies are now dwindling. The combined effects of shifting demands and disruption of production are beginning to cause some serious concerns over our ability to feed Florida's most vulnerable citizens. We need a comprehensive plan and coordinated effort to preserve and distribute available foods and to begin to plan and manage the food needs of hungry Floridians. The Department of Agriculture is Constitutionally and Legislatively empowered to oversee, regulate and manage agricultural, crop and livestock issues. We encourage you to provide FDACS with the additional resources needed to implement preservation, distribution and availability of food resources for our state.

Lastly, with regard to Executive branch action, we renew our call for an immediate expansion of any resources provided by the CARES Act and the Families First Coronavirus Response Act ("FFCRA") that Florida has not accessed. Testing for the Corona Virus is key to management and infection control. The FFCRA includes protections for the states by providing COVID-19 testing at no cost to the states. Please draw down and implement these resources to test as many Floridians as possible. Testing without treatment, however, is not enough. With the dramatic number of employment terminations caused by this pandemic Florida faces an historic increase in the ranks of the uninsured. As these Floridians brace for and cope with the devastating impacts of COVID-19, health insurance coverage is more important than ever. Therefore, we renew our call for an Executive Order expanding Medicaid eligibility, including a request to the federal government for Florida to use its Medicaid Section 1115 in combination with Section 1135 waiver authority, to fully cover uninsured individuals who would not otherwise be eligible for Medicaid coverage during the public health crisis, and potentially beyond. These waivers have been used by other states in past emergencies to expand coverage and several states already have applied during the current emergency.

Of course, the need for health care coverage will extend far beyond the current crisis. Uninsured people are less likely than those with insurance to receive services for major health conditions and chronic diseases. As this pandemic has shown, people with underlying health conditions are among the groups most at risk. Therefore, we renew our call for Florida to finally join the majority of states that have expanded Medicaid to provide coverage for childless adults to 138% of the Federal Poverty Level, as authorized by the Affordable Care Act, and which provides a 90% Federal/10% state match.

Another pressing issue requires Legislative, rather than Executive, action. With multiple election cycles upon us, it is important that voters feel safe and empowered to exercise their right to vote, in a manner of their choosing, without having to ask for such. Should this state still be dealing with virus related shutdowns or a second wave of infections in August and/or November, it is imperative that we plan for and take measures to ensure safe access to voting for all Floridians. Therefore, every registered voter should automatically receive a vote by mail ballot which would

allow them to decide for themselves whether they wish to vote early, poll vote, or return the vote by mail ballot. Providing a VBM ballot to every Floridian ensures that all voters have the ability to vote without worrying that they may contract or spread the virus.

In conclusion, we believe immediate action is needed at the Executive and Legislative levels as it relates to these issues. Fixing the unemployment claims system and expanding benefits, protecting food security and the expansion of COVID-19 testing and health insurance coverages can be accomplished through Executive Order or administrative action. As to the potential for a Special Session, the provision of a vote by mail ballot to every registered voter should be included in any such a call.

Thank you for your kind consideration of and anticipated action on these important requests.

Sincerely,



Senator Gary M. Farmer, Jr.
Democratic Leader Designate



Sen. Lori Berman



Sen. Lauren Book



Sen. Randolph Bracy



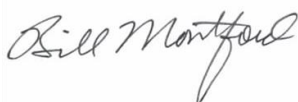
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Sen. Darryl Rouson



Sen. Linda Stewart



Sen. Annette Taddeo



Sen. Perry Thurston, Jr.



Sen. Victor Torres, Jr.

cc: The Honorable Lieutenant Governor Jeanette Nuñez
The Honorable Senate President Bill Galvano
The Honorable House Speaker Jose Oliva
The Honorable Commissioner Nikki Fried