

## Coronavirus Pandemic: The ‘*Si Se Puede*’ Challenge

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The coronavirus pandemic will challenge Latino advocacy strategies and ‘*Si se puede*’ (yes we can) social change mantra. Latinos are at high-risk of experiencing disproportionate social, financial and health hardships from the coronavirus pandemic. High employment in the service industry, low-incomes, limited access to paid leave, and high diabetes and uninsured rates are some of the major risk factors. Having health insurance, financial resources, and employment benefits are critical to whether the effects of the pandemic’s public health emergency. Existing inequalities in access to health care, social, and economic opportunities are becoming increasingly more evident as a result of the coronavirus pandemic – as exemplified by the inadequate coronavirus testing in [border communities](#).

The [demonstrated incompetence](#) of President Trump’s administration to lessen the effects of the coronavirus pandemic and delegation (and blame) to the states to take the lead abandons required national leadership. In turn, Texas has been slow to respond to the coronavirus pandemic resulting in a disparate health and financial security impact on the most disadvantaged populations. In part, state leaders have mimicked President Trump’s dithering harmful response. Governor Abbott has said that local [governments should lead](#) the response efforts. However, this position has been criticized as [hypocritical](#) given the states’ attack and efforts to stop local government regulatory decisions relating to affordable housing, paid leave, and LGBTQ concerns.

In addition, Lt. Governor Patrick did not support the preventive measure to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus – he would [rather die than ruin the economy](#). Given the state’s history its real meaning is ‘protect big business and the fittest will survive the coronavirus’. The state’s documented failures to maintain a strong social safety-net and its history of inequitable public policies that are counter-productive to social and economic mobility will worsen the coronavirus health and financial risks. Adding to the lack of urgency, Senator Cornyn is nearly silent in urging federal support for medical and financial resources for the state to combat the coronavirus pandemic compared to his overt and misleading attention on [blaming China](#) for the pandemic.

Certainly, all Texans must first do everything possible to prevent the spread of the virus, take care of their families, and to help their neighbors where possible. Front-line health responders, local governments, civic minded businesses, and non-profit service provider are demonstrating responsible and compassionate efforts in confronting the many layers of issues and needs. We must do everything possible to support them on 2 fronts – 1) comply with the coronavirus prevention guidelines; and 2) urge our public representatives to take decisive actions to insure that medical and other human resources are equitably available to help them address the enormous needs that are still growing.

The coronavirus is having comprehensive effects on the health and financial security of Texans, and the state’s economy. [Job losses](#) are projected at over one million with personal incomes losses totaling nearly 59 billion. Latinos will [likely represent](#) a major share of these losses. Texas industry losses are projected at nearly 261 billion dollars. State and local

government budget will be [negatively impacted](#), increasing the political and policy challenges for Latino advocates and allies across a wide range of human capital investment issues. The 87<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session beginning in January 12, 2021 will undoubtedly be even more politically grueling because of the projected budget short-fall in the billions of dollars; and the state's standard pro-business and inadequate investments in safety-net and human capital investments (e.g., educations, workforce development, affordable housing).

The health impact of the coronavirus has been steadily increasing. As of April 18, 2020, there were 18,260 coronavirus cases, 453 reported deaths, and at least 176,239 tests have been run. The big questions are: Are coronavirus tests being aggressively conducted? Does everyone have equal access to testing? Is care accessible if needed? Is quality health care being provided regardless of insurance coverage? How are the health care system (medical professionals, hospitals, clinics, etc.) performing in meeting needs and demands from the coronavirus individual medical and health systems effects? These are critical questions that will test the states' heretofore national low rankings in public health expenditure (48<sup>th</sup>), health system performance (43<sup>rd</sup>), highest uninsured rates; and 39<sup>th</sup> in coronavirus data collection. Further, the state's coronavirus information dissemination transparency is [weak](#). Unfortunately, state leaders have already failed its citizen with its [national ranking of 49<sup>th</sup>](#) in the number of individual Texans tested for the coronavirus - 332/100,000.

No doubt, 'resiliency' characterizes Latinos and their families throughout Texas's evolution. Latino demographic and labor force growth, education increases, and increasing small business and home ownership representation exemplify our resiliency and determination. The coronavirus pandemic must not be allowed to 'set-back' Latino *bienestar* (well-being) achievements – social, health, and economic mobility. Vulnerable areas that pose both high risks for Covid-19, and that demand equitable policy attention to avert or minimize its health and socio-economic impact include:

- Existing wealth gaps means less likely to afford several days or weeks without income. Nearly 5 million or 45% of Latinos have income below 200% of poverty.
- Nearly 50% are employed in industries most likely to lose jobs.
- Sixty-one percent of uninsured Texans are Latino; the state has the highest uninsured rate in the nation with nearly 5 million uninsured, mostly lower wage workers. An estimated 700,000 low-wage Texans fall into the "coverage gap" – individuals who do not have employer sponsored coverage, earn too little to qualify for health insurance subsidies through the federal healthcare exchange programs and do not qualify for Medicaid coverage.
- Two-thirds of uninsured Texans are U.S. Citizens; however, 54 percent of people who have at least one non-citizen in their family are uninsured.
- The relentless political and policy attacks on immigrants, particularly the undocumented, are proving counter-productive while increasing their risks to the coronavirus and others.
  - Latino immigrants (3.2 million) contribute significantly to the state's economy; now risking their health and life working in the essential areas of healthcare, farm work, and construction.

- Over 2.3 million children live in families with at least 1 immigrant parent, which, because of the revised ‘Public Charge Rule’; has resulted in less access to much needed basic safety-net services – undocumented, naturalized citizens, and native.
- Undocumented immigrants are much less likely to seek healthcare or other help despite purported statements that they will not be ‘reported’, or the public charge rule held against them.
- Over 52% of public-school students are Latino, and approximately 65% are economically disadvantaged. With schools closed, parents are encountering enumerable daily-life problems relating to their education, nutrition, and daycare. Access to on-line education resources, free or reduced costs meals, and daycare add to the burdens and challenges for many families.

Across the state, Latinos and their allies are continuing their work in education, workforce and economic development, housing, health; and critical political suppression and electoral power issues. Their collaborative work is increasingly more imperative to insure both a coherent and equitable statewide public health response to the coronavirus pandemic and developing political and policy strategies that prevent further disparities and inequities resulting from the direct and indirect effects of the coronavirus.

Poor health and death, high unemployment, lost income, meeting basic needs (food, utilities, rent, transportation), setbacks in education, housing losses, access to childcare, and small business losses are all interrelated issues that are being significantly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. These are all concerns whose effects have both short- and long-term damaging results on families. Effects, which may be as diverse as Latino families; whether urban or rural, farmworkers, and immigrants from El Paso to the Lower Rio Grande Valley border communities; Houston, Dallas, Austin or San Antonio; and from Coastal Corpus Christi to Lubbock in West Texas. Families across communities important to the state’s economy.

Despite the many challenges, Latinos are the future of Texas. Progress must not be diminished or held-back because of the health and economic effects of the coronavirus. Concerns and actions are required to insure equitable federal and state emergency economic support for all workers, to support Latino small businesses, expands Medicaid, increasing the minimum wage and paid leave benefits, stopping all mortgage foreclosures and evictions from housing rentals for several months; and increase funding for education programs to encompass daycare, head start, English Learners, and student debit relief programs. Further, immigrant workers and families must not be excluded from any coronavirus pandemic relief policies. ‘Si se puede’ must continue as the mantra for policies that directly increase the social, health, and economic mobility of Latino families.