



March 18, 2020

Governor Brad Little
Office of the Governor, Idaho State Capitol
PO Box 83720
Boise, ID 83720

Dear Governor Little,

As we face the rapidly developing news around the COVID-19 pandemic, Idaho Voices for Children is first and foremost focused on the health and safety of our state's kids and families. We applaud your emergency declaration and the Idaho Legislature's approval of \$3.3 million to aid in the coronavirus response. However, our state can do more to enhance its COVID-19 response and future preparedness as this public health crisis escalates.

The coronavirus pandemic highlights the importance of the work we and our fellow advocates are doing to strengthen public policies that improve equity and access to health care, housing, family financial security and child care. We are concerned that existing barriers to equity and access will be magnified for Idahoans who are most affected by them, such as low-income families, people of color, rural communities and other disproportionately affected groups. In addition, we are especially focused on people with increased health risks from COVID-19, including young children, people who are elderly and people with underlying health conditions. State leaders must prioritize these vulnerable populations in Idaho's response.

Idaho Voices for Children has a robust policy team monitoring the COVID-19 situation closely. We would like to offer our support as a vehicle for outreach and a resource for policy actions. In this letter, we outline policy areas impacted by the coronavirus and offer six recommendations for you and the State of Idaho to adequately respond to this pandemic.

Health Care Policy Recommendations

The spread of COVID-19 has highlighted the need for accessible and responsive health care. Our state's Medicaid system provides crucial care and coverage for thousands of Idahoans, and a pandemic highlights just how important this system is. Medicaid expansion has provided health coverage to over 67,000 Idahoans who now have the ability to see a doctor, receive a COVID-19 test and get the care needed if they are sick – all without financial hardship. Idaho needs to develop and implement a flexible and robust response to this national health emergency.

1. Idaho should take quick action to educate the public and stop the spread of COVID-19.

- *Distribute protective supplies across Idaho:* Idaho should increase the availability and distribution of protective supplies. Distribution should target a variety of populations, including Idahoans with disabilities and their families, Idahoans who are elderly, rural Idahoans, Latinx communities and refugee populations.
- *Increase COVID-19 testing:* Idaho should increase testing and ensure testing access across the state to diverse populations. A priority should be placed on homeless shelters,

food pantries and senior centers to ensure vulnerable populations are tested, treated and cared for if sick.

- *Educate on social distancing*: Idaho should increase and amplify outreach and education about the importance of social distancing, including messaging in multiple languages.

2. Idaho should maximize Medicaid’s flexibility to address the public health crisis.¹

- *Leverage additional federal funds to increase public awareness about Medicaid*: The federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act² includes a temporary 6.2 percentage point increase in states’ federal matching assistance percentages (FMAPs). These additional funds can be used to expand public awareness, outreach and enrollment assistance to maximize Medicaid’s reach, ensure people can immediately obtain the care they need and help people know they can enroll in Medicaid any time.
- *Ensure Medicaid access for all high-risk populations*: Idaho should consider submitting a Medicaid State Plan Amendment³ to (1) increase eligibility for adults and children under age 65 with incomes above 138 percent of the poverty line at the state’s regular FMAP; (2) increase eligibility for other coverage groups including pregnant women, people with disabilities, and seniors at Idaho’s regular FMAP; and (3) eliminate or decrease asset tests for seniors and people with disabilities.
- *Maximize Idaho’s use of presumptive eligibility*: Idaho can adopt presumptive eligibility for all eligible Medicaid populations, including children and pregnant women, through expansion of qualified entities, including the state agency, community health centers and other community sites. Idaho can maximize the use of automated *ex parte* renewals to reduce workload, minimize burden on beneficiaries and keep people covered.

Housing Policy Recommendations

Renters with extremely low-incomes and people experiencing homelessness are often elderly, people with disabilities and/or health compromised – making these Idahoans disproportionately vulnerable to severe illness or complications from COVID-19. As a result of their circumstances, these same families and individuals are likely to live in close quarters with others, be unable to engage in critical social distancing decisions and are unlikely to have the ability to self-isolate in the event they are exposed. Furthermore, many renters in Idaho with modest incomes are one missed paycheck away from facing eviction or homelessness.

3. Idaho should enact rental and utility protections for low-income, high-risk populations.

- *Enact a moratorium on evictions and utility shut-offs*: In an effort to prevent the coronavirus crisis and Idaho’s current housing uncertainty from being further compounded, Governor Little should work with other state and private entities to enact a statewide moratorium on eviction proceedings and freeze utility shut-offs for failure to pay. These policies would ensure Idahoans facing housing and income instability are able to stay in their homes and remain healthy during this tumultuous time.

¹ Please refer to Close the Gap Idaho’s “[Medicaid COVID-19 Messages](#)” for details on Medicaid and COVID-19.

² Families First Coronavirus Response Act: [H.R.6201](#)

³ While additional steps can be taken using waivers, a lot can be accomplished through State Plan Amendments (SPAs) or through changes in state policies and processes that do not require federal approval. Please refer to this “[Memo on State Medicaid Options to Address COVID-19](#)” for more information.

Family Financial Security Policy Recommendations

Quarantines, layoffs, and other upheavals caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are putting the financial well-being of working families at risk, especially those living paycheck-to-paycheck. For children and families living in households that struggle against hunger, COVID-19 presents unique challenges. As more schools, child care centers and meal sites close, additional families will lose access to food programs that improve their nutrition, health and well-being. Furthermore, many of Idaho's service-sector workers do not have paid sick leave and may not be able to afford to take off work if they are sick or if they need to care for a sick child. Encouraging people to stay home is not enough if their jobs, wages and ability to feed their families are on the line.

4. Idaho should enact temporary waivers on eligibility and work requirements for programs that provide nutrition, food and other basic assistance.

- *Suspend family eligibility redetermination on essential public benefits:* Idaho should adopt a temporary suspension of family eligibility redetermination, as well as family fees and copays, for critical services to ensure that temporary changes in family employment, earnings or other factors due to COVID-19 do not impact family eligibility. These services include child care subsidies; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Medicaid; and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).
- *Waive work requirements on food assistance:* Idaho should temporarily waive work requirements on SNAP and TANF for good cause and to ensure that families are able to put food on the table during this public health crisis.
- *Implement a public/private plan to deliver food and medicine:* Government and the private sector should collaborate to create a plan to deliver food, medicine and sanitation supplies to those who are quarantined or isolated.

5. Idaho should expand paid sick days for workers to prevent the spread of disease.

- *Establish a temporary paid sick day program:* To protect the state's workers in the short term, Idaho should create a temporary paid sick day program to slow community spread of the coronavirus. Employers in food service, hospitality, home health, community living facilities, education and child care should be required to provide paid sick leave for workers with flu-like symptoms to allow time to be tested for COVID-19. Governor Little should encourage all other private employers to extend paid sick days and family leave to encourage people to stay home if sick and as long as needed to recover.

Children Safety and Well-Being Policy Recommendations

Idaho school closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are widespread. As of Tuesday, more than 70 districts and charters announced they were closing. For mid- to upper-income families where all the adults work, finding child care options could be a costly and onerous task. But it will be the low-income working families that will struggle the most to have children looked after. Grandparents and older adults who are most at risk of COVID-19 are encouraged to self-isolate and may not be able to provide care. As essential workers are needed in health care and other key industries, their children will need safe, high-quality child care. A lack of supervision for children can lead to unsafe situations, and essential workers should not be forced to choose between serving their community and good care for their children.

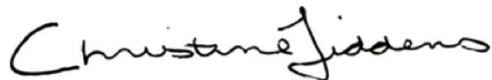
6. Idaho should provide emergency support to child care programs.⁴

- *Offer flexible funding for child care:* Because child care is essential to the state's ability to effectively respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, Idaho must support the continued existence of child care, including programs that support families with child care subsidies and those that do not. Idaho should provide additional funding to child care and allow financing flexibility, waive copays and move everyone permanently from attendance-based payment policies to enrollment-based policies.
- *Provide child care for children of essential personnel:* If the state's districts and charters close schools, then Idaho should consider closing the child care system. Simultaneously, select licensed child care centers and family child care homes should be allowed to remain open on a limited basis in order to serve the children of emergency responders and other essential personnel for whom remote work is not an option.
- *Ensure unemployment benefits for programs closed due to COVID-19:* Alongside actions taken by the federal government to increase access to paid leave and unemployment insurance, Idaho must ensure that all child care system closures are accompanied by funding that allows for access to unemployment compensation for staff who work in center-based child care or are owners/staff of family child care homes.

We encourage you to enact our recommended measures immediately, before the economic damage from COVID-19 becomes severe. In addition to these recommendations, we encourage you to consult the guidance provided by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Agriculture, Administration for Children and Families, the Office of Childcare, Office of Head Start and the Health Resources and Services Administration for updates on the flexibility allowed to states for key program funding streams.

Our communities look to government to provide protection and services in times of crisis. At Idaho Voices for Children, we will do everything we can to support Idaho leaders as they evaluate options to battle this coronavirus pandemic and build policies that support everyone in our state, especially those most in need. Our hearts are with the leaders, front-line medical personnel, first responders and other community members working to keep us all safe and contain this public health crisis.

Sincerely,



Christine Tiddens, LMSW
Idaho Voices for Children Director

⁴ Please refer to NEAYC's "[Child Care is Essential](#)" for details on child care and COVID-19.