

**COVID 19 Rates in Tennessee's Latino Communities is a State of Emergency**  
*An Open Letter to Governor Lee and Local Governments from Latino-serving  
Organizations and Leaders*

Tennessee is receiving national attention for our rising rates of COVID-19 infections. We need a robust plan and response from our elected leaders to curb the rate of infections and save lives. We also need a focused and targeted response to reach the communities most impacted by the pandemic and ensure that no one is left behind. We are only as healthy and safe as the most vulnerable members of our community.

Latino communities across Tennessee are experiencing disproportionately high rates of COVID-19 infections. While Latinos comprise only 5.6 percent of the state population, [they account for 35 percent of overall infection rates](#). In Nashville and Knoxville, 1 in 3 COVID-19 positive individuals is Latino, and in Chattanooga infections among Latinos account for 68 percent of current cases. **We, the undersigned 18 organizations and community leaders working with Latino communities across Tennessee, urge you to recognize that Latino families, regardless of immigration status, are Tennesseans too and deserve an urgent and robust response from our government proportionate to the crisis facing our communities.**

Latino families are deeply rooted in the fabric of Tennessee communities and are doing essential work on the frontlines of this crisis, but deep structural and racial inequities in our health and economic systems are causing people of color to be infected with COVID-19 and die at higher rates.<sup>1</sup> Latinos, especially the foreign-born, face enormous obstacles in accessing critical services that contribute to our health and well-being, such as limited English proficiency, ineligibility for public benefits, poverty, lack of transportation, fear, and discrimination. The barriers and inequities are compounded during the pandemic with families now facing job and income losses, evictions, exorbitant medical bills, lack of childcare, and more.

**We respectfully urge you to implement these immediate steps:**

**Invest in community health workers and case management programs:** We know that Latino families face many barriers when seeking care and effectively quarantining after testing positive. We need to scale up effective models like community health workers to include more Spanish-speaking staff members across the state.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the American Community Census Survey, approximately, 228,437 native born Tennesseans identify as Latino and more than 30,000 Latinos are naturalized U.S. citizens. Tennessee is also home to 121,000 undocumented people with 85 percent from Mexico, Central and South America. About 71 percent of our undocumented population lacks access to health insurance. Additionally, the majority of the undocumented population works in construction, hospitality, and manufacturing, industries that are highly susceptible to spread of the virus.

**Support effective quarantine to slow the spread:** Latino families often live in multigenerational households, and effective quarantine is difficult with limited space. Governments can mitigate the problem by providing alternative accommodation for COVID-19 positive individuals, such as hotels, until it is safe to reunite with families. Additionally, many Latino families are facing the difficult choice between prioritizing their health or putting food on the table. Governments should provide financial assistance to make it easier for people to quarantine if their jobs don't offer paid sick leave to care for themselves or their families.

**Partner with our organizations to organize targeted testing:** Agencies should coordinate with and support immigrant-serving organizations to offer testing at well-known, central and accessible locations and ensure that critical information is disseminated widely and reaches all communities. Subgrants to increase the capacity of trusted community organizations or Spanish-language media outlets should be provided as they encourage testing and promote available resources.

**Include immigrants, regardless of immigration status, in care and economic relief:** Immigrant families have been largely left out of federal efforts to provide care and relief in response to COVID-19. While the state and local governments have worked to offer testing to all, regardless of immigration status, we need robust economic stimulus programs to help families make ends meet without putting themselves or their communities at risk.

**Issue clear COVID-19 workplace health and safety regulations and hold employers accountable:** Media reports have also shown many Latino essential workers continue to be exposed to the virus at their workplace, putting their families and communities at risk. Our state and local governments must ensure that all employers are implementing the guidance of OSHA and public health experts on how to keep all employees, including immigrants, safe at work. These expanded health and safety protections must go hand-in-hand with mechanisms to ensure employers are complying and employees feel safe speaking up. [Click here for a list of recommendations specifically related to COVID-19 workplace health and safety.](#)

**Clarify policies and rebuild trust:** Many Latino immigrant families have come to fear government agencies and places that are meant to keep them safe. Government agencies and health institutions must strengthen and publicize policies to reassure immigrants that accessing care and services won't result in immigration consequences.

**Establish Offices for Immigrant Inclusion:** States and municipalities that have Offices for New Americans (also called Offices for Immigrants and Refugees) have been able to swiftly respond to the economical, health, and educational crisis presented by COVID-19. These offices serve as a clearing house, working to ensure consistency of multilingual messages and resources across the state, help to coordinate efforts that lead to more equitable and efficient outcomes, and strengthen local efforts to respond in a timely manner. Many of them have become trusted voices and are now pivoting to focus on resilient recovery. We call on the state and local governments to invest in Offices For Immigrant Inclusion, recognizing that our

prosperity as a state is dependent on our ability to support the most vulnerable populations, both during and after this pandemic.

While this letter specifically addresses the state of emergency in Latino communities, we also urge policymakers to find solutions to address the disproportionate COVID-19 infection and death rates in non-Latino Black communities and other communities of color. This pandemic is an opportunity to recast our vision for an inclusive and equitable society that takes care of everyone, immigrants included. No matter where we're from or how we got here, we all need access to testing, treatment, resources, and information to care for our families. And in a pandemic situation, an investment to protect the most vulnerable ultimately protects the broader community and hospital system as well.

Thanks so much for your consideration. The only way we'll make it through this crisis is if the measures you take protect *all* of us.

Sincerely,

Better Options TN  
Casa de la Cultura Latino Americana  
CasaLuz  
Centro Hispano de East Tennessee  
Conexión Américas  
Diocese of Knoxville  
Ebenezer Fellowship United Methodist Church  
FUTURO, Inc.  
La Paz Chattanooga  
Latino Memphis  
Memphis Wesley Foundation  
Mid-South Immigration Advocates  
Nashville Area Hispanic Chamber of Commerce  
Neighborhood Health  
Siloam Health  
Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition  
Tennessee Justice for Our Neighbors  
Tennessee Latin American Chamber of Commerce