



March 23, 2022: NJ Assembly Budget Testimony

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Francesca Baroni and I am the Coordinator for Health Justice Initiatives with the Latino Action Network Foundation and a Latino Action Network steering committee member. While LAN and LAN Foundation's organizing efforts center around the Latino community, we are dedicated to a just society for everyone and oppose all forms of discrimination.

As such, today, I will be advocating for adequate budgetary allocations that can ameliorate the health disparities of New Jersey's Latino community, as well as various other marginalized communities, which have only been exacerbated by the pandemic. In 2021, LAN Foundation released two reports on barriers to mental health services, revealing a dire need for bilingual mental health services. Both reports can be accessed at lanfoundation.org/health-justice. While we appreciate the fact that mental health services were highlighted in the Governor's budget proposal, the FY23 budget should place a much greater emphasis on the mental health needs of Black and Latino New Jerseyans. We advocate for allocating \$3 million for bilingual mental health services and workforce development. Targeted funding should also be utilized to establish bilingual mental health professional residencies to bridge language access gaps for Latino communities. We also advocate for the inclusion of Mental Health Professionals in the License Fee Holiday to establish greater equity between mental and physical health care in access, coverage, and within the professions. It is vital to expand the list of professional license renewals and new application fee waivers to include mental health professionals in recognition of their work through the pandemic. Specifically, we advocate for the inclusion of Certified Social Workers, Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselors, Licensed Clinical Social Workers, Licensed Social Workers, Marriage and Family Therapists, Professional Counselors, Psychoanalysts, and Psychologists. For this, our partners have estimated a \$1.6 million allocation.



LAN Foundation has also advocated for Cover All Kids to help bridge the gap in services to Latino communities. We applaud New Jersey in taking the steps to pass this legislation and Governor Murphy's allocation of \$11 million to Cover All Kids in his budget proposal. However, for full implementation of Cover All Kids, our NJ for Health Care coalition partners have found that \$20 million would be necessary to cover the estimated cost of enrolling 5,000 of the approximately 18,000 newly eligible children into the NJ Family Care Advantage program and outreach funds. We also support our coalition partners in asking for appropriate funding to be allocated for NJ Family Care Buy-In Subsidies. NJFC buy-in alternatives for families were envisioned to begin in the second half of FY2023. This option would give the approximately 2,000 children undocumented but ineligible for the Cover All Kids expansion a health insurance option, and could also address those caught in the family glitch, immigrants here less than 5 years, or those eligible for DACA who are ineligible for ACA Marketplace coverage. Health Insurance Assessment funds should be budgeted to ensure enrollees will receive assistance comparable to Marketplace enrollees who pay no more than 8.5% of adjusted gross income.

Too often, the needs of Black and brown communities have been placed at the margins of our budgetary priorities. It is time that our budget centers on communities of color and directly addresses the impacts of structural racism. As such, it is vital that our budget is conducive to expanded accessibility of physical and mental health services, especially in light of the pandemic. We thank you for the opportunity to provide public comments about our legislative budget priorities.