

October 6, 2020

The Honorable Greg Abbott
Governor of Texas
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 12428
Austin, TX 78711-2428

The Honorable Dan Patrick
Lieutenant Governor of Texas
Office of the Lieutenant Governor
P.O. Box 12068
Austin, TX 78711-2068

The Honorable Dennis Bonnen
Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives
P.O. Box 2910
Austin, TX 78768-2910

Delivered via Email

Re: Proposed Cuts to HHSC Eligibility and Enrollment Staff Positions

Dear Gov. Abbott, Lt. Gov. Patrick, and Speaker Bonnen,

We are writing to express our appreciation for the removal of direct Client Services from the list of proposed state health cuts in the current biennium and to express our concern about the revised Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) proposal.

In particular, we are concerned that in attempting to comply with your request for \$131 million in state health cuts, HHSC has proposed cuts that could create delays for children, pregnant women, Texans with disabilities, seniors, and eligible caregivers seeking health insurance through Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Those cuts could also delay enrollment in Healthy Texas Women, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). As you know, the agency is proposing reduced or delayed hiring for 742 eligibility and enrollment staff positions. In its proposal, HHSC notes that these cuts may create delays that cause the state to fall short of meeting federal standards for enrolling individuals in these programs in a timely manner.

Any potential delays in enrolling eligible Texans in health insurance programs are especially concerning in light of the health insurance challenges the state is facing. Recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau show that in 2019, prior to the pandemic, Texas had the nation's highest uninsured rates for children and for adults and that both rates have grown worse in recent years. The numbers were considerably higher in Texas than in any other state in 2019, with 18.4% of Texans going without insurance (Oklahoma was second highest at 14.3%) and 12.7% of Texas children going without insurance (Wyoming was second highest at 10.6%). This challenge has only accelerated in 2020, with an estimated 659,000 more Texans becoming uninsured during the first months of the pandemic. Compared to the rest of the nation, Texas has had unusually high uninsured rates among every racial/ethnic group in the state. At the same time, there are also significant racial disparities in access to health coverage.

As you know, lack of access to health insurance has disturbing financial and health consequences, undermining Texas' efforts to keep children in school, address mental health, support healthy pregnancies and healthy babies, combat cancer, ensure children consistently attend check-ups, refer toddlers with disabilities and developmental delays to the services they need, encourage immunizations, stop the spread of COVID-19, and other challenges. Research shows that when people have insurance, they are healthier and less likely to die prematurely. Uninsured individuals typically wait longer to seek medical care, leading to worse health outcomes and higher costs for families and taxpayers, and are less likely to see a health care professional.

While the state's high uninsured rate for adults reflects the fact there is typically no health insurance option available to uninsured workers below the poverty line, the high uninsured rate for children is a different challenge. Most children in low-income families are eligible for either Medicaid or CHIP, so the challenge is enrolling eligible children and keeping them enrolled. There are multiple steps Texas can take to address that challenge — such as boosting outreach efforts and providing 12 months of continuous coverage for children enrolled in Medicaid — but the first step is to do no harm.

We therefore encourage you to not to move forward with the proposed cuts to the HHSC eligibility and enrollment workforce.

We understand that the health cuts are under consideration as a way of addressing the state's revenue shortfall. We respectfully encourage you to address the revenue shortfall through other tools — such as using the Economic Stabilization Fund, seeking additional federal pandemic relief funding, and exploring other revenue options — while maintaining full funding for services for kids and families during these challenging times.

We appreciate your consideration and look forward to working with you to ensure Texans have the health insurance they need to stay healthy and thrive during this pandemic and beyond.

Sincerely,

Autism Society of Texas
Children's Defense Fund - Texas
Every Texan
League of Women Voters of Texas
Mental Health America of Greater Dallas
Methodist Healthcare Ministries of South Texas, Inc.
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Texas
National Association of Social Workers - Texas Chapter
Network of Behavioral Health Providers (NBHP)
PediPlace
Texans Care for Children
Texas Academy of Family Physicians
Texas Association of Community Health Centers
Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities
Texas Hospital Association
Texas Medical Association
Texas Parent to Parent
Texas Pediatric Society
Texas State Employees Union
Texas Women's Healthcare Coalition
United Ways of Texas
Young Invincibles