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April 7, 2020

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Juanzena Johnson
Executive Director

Governor Larry Hogan, Chairperson
The National Governors Association
444 North Capitol Street, Suite 267
Washington, DC 20001

Dear Chairman Hogan:

The National Black Caucus of State Legislators (NBCSL) is the nation's premier organization representing and serving the interests of African American State legislators. With more than 700 members representing over 60 million Americans, NBCSL serves as a national network, advocate and catalyst for public policy innovation, information exchange, and joint action on critical issues affecting African Americans and other marginalized communities. As President of the NBCSL, I write to draw the National Governor's Association's (NGA) attention to issues facing your/our constituents in communities of color as a result of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and global pandemic commonly referred to as COVID 19. As a novel virus, it may be too early to have definitive studies on the specific health impact on your/our constituents in communities of color, but history suggests that persons with high incidents of respiratory ailments, immunosuppressive diseases, and cardiac disease, may be disparately impacted. While the "Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act" ("CARES Act") provides a glimmer of hope in these uncertain times, the gravity of this pandemic, coupled with a lack of focus on the most vulnerable and least resilient constituents, NBCSL believes will result in manifest injustice and may cripple our recovery as a nation.

First, while the lack of access to SARS-CoV-2 virus screenings is a national public health failure, due to the unique health challenges facing communities of color, this phenomenon strikes a critical blow. Communities of color have a disproportionately high incidence of risk factors for contracting the virus and subsequently dying from COVID 19. Such risk factors include asthma, diabetes, heart failure, hypertension, lupus, etc., and therefore, we think priority should be given to testing this most vulnerable population. We know that the public health failure of access to testing is exacerbated when considering these constituents. In addition to testing, we implore state executives to request and monitor national efforts to develop a vaccine that is effective for every segment of the population, especially those who are at high risk of death from COVID 19. NBCSL suggests that Governors push to make sure vaccine clinical trials are developed in a manner that is equitable and ensures that every trial includes a diverse sample population.

Governor Larry Hogan, Chairperson
April 7, 2020

Second, K-12 school children, as well as college students around the country are adapting to the new normal of virtual classrooms. This new reality lays bare the educational divide between persons of wealth and low-income families as it relates to equitable and adequate education. The divide is highlighted by the lack of broadband access, food security, and safe learning environments for students in low-income communities. We urge governors to prioritize the use of federal funds to ensure that all students and especially those from low-income communities, have access to broadband, meals, and safe learning environments to complete their education.

Third, while we remain optimistic for our nation's full economic recovery, this crisis presents stark lessons that must be mastered in order to build a more inclusive, dynamic, and resilient 21st century economy. We implore the NGA members to enact, and/or enforce, policies that will prioritize economic recovery for historically disadvantaged businesses, single owner businesses, service industry workers, and faith-based organizations.

Finally, but equally important to this discussion, is the inalienable right of your/our constituents to participate in governing themselves in our representative democracy. NBCSL would like to partner with the NGA to fight against the scourge of voter suppression and intimidation wherever it exists. We encourage you to join us in advocating for additional federal funds to ensure safe and cyber-secure elections this year through no-excuse absentee ballots or the equivalent.

We appreciate your consideration of these concerns and suggestions and request a conference call at your earliest convenience to further discuss these and other issues. I can be reached by email at president@nbcsl.org or by phone at 803-347-2979. We at the NBCSL stand ready to work with you and our nation's Governors to protect the most vulnerable and, traditionally, the most underserved communities. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gilda Cobb-Hunter".

Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter
President