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COVID-19 Response Perpetuates Inequities for Vulnerable Children and Families

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, Children's Defense Fund-California (CDF-CA) releases the following statement:

The COVID-19 pandemic is triggering a global emergency response that is shifting the daily lives of families across the nation and the world. While the incidence and risk of COVID-19 are lower for children, COVID-19 is adversely impacting their quality of life through school closures and their parents losing employment. Basic needs are at stake and we demand that officials pay attention to the needs of low-income, mixed-status, and Black, Brown and Indigenous families.

"Despite what is being said, our children are not being spared from COVID-19. In fact, it is our most vulnerable -- poor Black, Brown and Indigenous children -- who are suffering the most," said Shimica Gaskins, executive director of Children's Defense Fund-California. "School closures mean more children will go without food, the education and opportunity gap will widen and families, already facing fewer hours and lay-offs, will struggle to find work because of lack of childcare.

"The social and economic inequities that are explicitly present during the COVID-19 response have always existed. We have the opportunity to close that equity gap and prevent COVID-19 from exacerbating the injustice."

As advocates for the most vulnerable children and families, CDF-CA urges the state and federal government to immediately address the basic needs of the families hit hardest by the directives to reduce the spread of COVID-19. We implore the following strategies be implemented to ensure equity in the COVID-19 emergency response:

Economic Justice in Emergency Response

In response to the economic downturn and loss of work, all children and families should have adequate food and housing.

1. Expand Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) to Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) filers so immigrant families can have access to financial resources to navigate underemployment
2. Provide access to food for low-income pregnant women and mothers with young children who lose their jobs or are laid off
3. Support local food banks in meeting the increased food demand of low-income families
4. Provide state-subsidized paid leave for families to care for children during school closures without exposing older grandparents and family members who are at risk for severe illness associated with COVID-19
5. Immediate moratoriums on evictions, foreclosures and utility shut-offs

Health Justice in Emergency Response

In response to the health burden of COVID-19, all children and families must have adequate access to health care services, regardless of immigration status.

1. Ensure free and easily accessible testing services for COVID-19

2. Uphold presumptive eligibility and do not turn people away from receiving health care services
3. Immediately end actions around public charge and deportation so that children and families can pursue health care and other services
4. Use the full range of options available in the Medicaid program to screen and treat children and families, including mobile clinics, telehealth and alternative settings such as schools and shelters
5. Temporarily suspend all cost-sharing, premiums and copays in Medi-Cal and Covered California
6. Incentivize Medi-Cal providers and health plans to reach out into the community to test and provide treatment to vulnerable populations, including children who are homeless

Juvenile Justice in Emergency Response

Heightened protections are needed to counter the greater risk of rapid infectious spread within closed, poorly ventilated, locked facilities like juvenile halls, camps, ranches and state facilities.

1. Screening and testing of staff, incarcerated youth and visitors
2. Protocols and resources for greater access to medical care, reasonable quarantine and evacuation to medical facilities
3. Continued access to attorneys and court hearings
4. Access to mail and free phone calls
5. Intensified cleaning of facilities, clothing and bedding, and provision of cleaning supplies to individual youth
6. Release of all medically compromised youth including youth with known respiratory conditions
7. Limit the number of youth detained with measures like barring detention for technical probation violations and minor offenses

Education Access in Emergency Response

In response to outbreak concerns and school closures, local districts and schools should ensure all students and their parents have their academic and basic needs met.

1. Expand school-based health and nursing services
2. Provide multilingual updates for families across paper and digital communication
3. When deciding whether to close schools, follow the California Department of Education's [guidance](#) to consult with local county public health departments and establish plans for continuity of learning to mitigate the effects of significant absences on student achievement
4. In the event of school closures:
 - a. Distribute free and reduced meals to families dependent on school meals
 - b. Connect working families to supervised childcare and enrichment programs
 - c. Provide transportation to foster youth and homeless youth to access family resource centers, shelters and other community resources
 - d. Ensure remote learning plans are accessible to all students, especially if internet, TVs, tablets, computers and/or radios are required; rely on books when possible
5. Counteract racism, xenophobia, fear of, and violence towards Asian and Pacific Islander communities by denouncing all forms of bullying and discrimination.

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Children's Defense Fund-California (CDF-CA) is the state office of the Children's Defense Fund, a national child advocacy organization founded by Marian Wright Edelman that has worked relentlessly for over 40 years to ensure a level playing field for all children. CDF-CA champions policies and programs that lift children out of poverty, ensure all children have health coverage and care and, a high quality education and transform the juvenile justice system to focus on youth development and healing.