

December 7, 2021

NJ Department of Human Services

222 S. Warren Street

Trenton, NJ 08608

Commissioner Johnson, Deputy Commissioner Adelman and Members of the Department,

Thank you for the opportunity to present our concerns and considerations today for the Department's fiscal 2023 proposed budget. My name is **Jessely De La Cruz** and I am the Executive Director for the Latino Action Network Foundation. The LAN Foundation is established as a charitable organization with the goal of uniting New Jersey's diverse Latino communities and advancing our economic and social empowerment. In addition to being a child of Latino immigrants who has been directly affected by the issues I am presenting today; I am also Past President of the Latino Mental Health Association and was a community-based bilingual mental health provider for over a decade. Our focus for today's testimony includes the implementation and funding for the Cover All Kids legislation and the state of mental health services for BIPOC communities.

These two policy areas are important to NJ's Latino community which now represents almost 23% of state's population. Latino children represent a quarter of NJ's school age children live in mixed status families. Too many Latino families are living with the daily stressors of poverty and must choose between basic food and shelter or health care costs, with mental health even lower on the priority list. Latino families experience language barriers to quality medical and behavioral health services. Heightened xenophobia and anti-Latino sentiments contribute to hesitancy to participate in government programs and stigma associated with seeking out health and mental health services. We recently saw the impact of these combined barriers during the COVID-19 pandemic and its disproportionate impact on Latino families.

To help bridge the gap in services to Latino communities, we are in support of our partners at the NJ Healthcare Coalition and believe that the expansion of Cover All Kids will greatly benefit the health and well-being of all Latino families in the state by decreasing the number of uninsured. We ask the Department to commit all the resources needed to ensure a full and effective implementation of these programs in fiscal 2023. The proposed DHS budget must

include funding to fully implement the expansion of coverage to all kids (beginning July 2022) and the NJ Family Care Advantage buy in program (January 2023). Also, we are urging the Department to convene the expanded Outreach, Enrollment and Retention Working Group without further delay. We are prepared to work with the Department to raise awareness of coverage options with our network of Latino Community Based Organizations to help ensure every child in New Jersey has access to health coverage. These agencies have a long track record of bridging the gap in early childhood and family-based services and have trusted relationships in the community that can help overcome obstacles to enrollment.

Second, the LAN Foundation recently released two policy mental health reports on barriers to mental health services for Latino and Black NJ residents. Among the recommendations, the LAN Foundation calls for:

- Funding for pathways to help bridge the gap for Black and Latinx persons seeking to obtain mental health degrees and licensure via supported partnerships and paid residencies.
- Funding for programs that integrate Black and Latino paraprofessionals such as Promotors [*Promotoras*] and faith-based leaders in community health outreach and education to help reduce stigma of the mental health system.

We also have several other recommendations in our policy reports that can be found on our website [www.lanfoundation.org/health-justice](http://www.lanfoundation.org/health-justice), including the need to incentivize collaboration and co-location of services among community-based organizations and churches to reduce gaps and achieve an increase in access to treatment amongst BIPOC communities. In addition, we call for Latino mental health and anti-racist curriculums be publicly available for professionals and the gathering of data about clients' race- related experiences when accessing mental health care.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments today.