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Advocates: Communities Hang in the Balance as Florida Denies Equal Access to Critical, Life-saving Resources Amid Pandemic

In violation of anti-discrimination provisions of the Civil Rights Act, Florida fails to provide limited-English proficient individuals with equal access to federally funded programs

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Today, a coalition of nearly 40 immigrant rights organizations are calling on Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and other state leaders to answer for the state's lack of federally funded emergency resources made available to limited-English proficiency (LEP) individuals throughout Florida as the COVID-19 pandemic ravages the state.

Advocates warn that the shocking absence of critical resources made accessible to the state's large LEP populations violates Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and its implementing regulations, including Executive Order 13166. On the ground, the lack of resources has led to confusion and distress as entire LEP communities are left in the dark.

"My daughter got sick and we went to the hospital," described **Doña Elba, a client of the Rural Women's Health Project (RWHP) who is a monolingual Spanish-speaker.** "They said she didn't have Coronavirus, but they never did a test or anything. Two days later my husband woke up with a fever and a cough. I was panicked." Doña Elba is one of tens of thousands of LEP individuals across the state who have been denied equal access to critical information. "I couldn't get information in Spanish about Coronavirus symptoms or anything," continued Doña Elba. "The lack of information in Spanish is horrible. There are so many of us here and we need information to know where to go to take care of ourselves."

Florida officials tasked with the administration of federally funded programs and activities that provide essential benefits or services to Florida communities have shirked their responsibility to provide crucial resources to the state's large LEP communities. According to the letter, areas in need of significant improvement include the Florida Department of Health and the State of Florida COVID-19 Information-Line.

"In these times, where knowledge is critical to curbing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative to provide prevention information in a clear and concise manner to all residents of the community and country," said **Ricardo Alcalá, Co-organizer of Madres Sin Fronteras**, one of the groups behind the letter. "Therefore, we are worried in our community that we cannot carry out prevention recommendations. We do not have the specific safety and prevention guidelines for essential activities in Spanish," continued Alcalá.

"COVID-19 requires a united effort to overcome," said **Robin Lewy, Director of Programming at RWHP.** "The inequity that the lack of compliance with providing information in other languages creates will be reflected in the unjust impact of this pandemic," continued Lewy. "We are in a crisis and not making this information easily accessible is neglecting to serve the entire community. Of concern is the lack of information in Spanish and Creole which reduces our ability to put the virus behind us."

Statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau's 5-year estimates from the 2014-2018 American Community Survey (ACS) show that almost 20.5 percent of Floridians are foreign born; 29.1 percent speak a language other than English at home, with Spanish (20% percent) and Haitian Creole (2 percent) among the most prevalent. 43 percent of Spanish speakers in Florida are LEP. Many LEP individuals in Florida are essential agricultural workers risking their lives to keep grocery shelves stocked amid the pandemic.

"Farmworkers in Florida are essential workers," said **Antonio Tovar, General Coordinator for Farmworkers Association of Florida.** "The majority are also immigrants from other countries whose first language is other than English. It is imperative that those whose hard work is keeping Florida residents fed during this crisis, and every day throughout the year, have important information in their own languages to protect themselves, their families, and their communities during this dangerous pandemic," continued Tovar. "It is not only the right and just thing to do, it is the rational thing to do."

In addition to Governor Ron DeSantis, recipients of the letter include Department of Health State Surgeon General Scott Rivkees, Division of Emergency Management Director Jared Moskowitz and Department of Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran.

"Given the significant number of LEP Floridians, it's crucial that state, county, and local agencies that are recipients of federally funded resources fulfill their legal obligation to ensure that LEP individuals have access to vital information and emergency aid," said **Luz Lopez, Senior Supervising Attorney with the Southern Poverty Law Center (ACPL) Action Fund.** "While COVID-19 does not

discriminate in its path of illness and death, we are witnessing communities of color, and linguistically-isolated communities in particular, suffer disproportionately from its harmful effects and consequences,” continued Lopez.

The letter sent today can be viewed at: <http://bit.ly/40orgletter>

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