



South Carolina House of Representatives

P. O. Box 11867 • COLUMBIA, S.C. 29211 • TELEPHONE 734-2010

May 7, 2020

The Honorable Henry D. McMaster
Governor, State of South Carolina
1100 Gervais Street
Columbia, SC 29201

Dear Governor McMaster:

The coronavirus pandemic has dramatically changed the lives of South Carolinians and the deadly contagion has highlighted both our state's strengths and weaknesses. With thousands testing positive and hundreds of lives lost to COVID-19, the resilience of our people will be challenged in the coming months as we work to establish our new normal while restoring our state's economy. We commend you for impaneling the AccelerateSC Task Force with your stated goal of 'recommending immediate, intermediate and long-term recommendations for revitalizing and expanding South Carolina's economy while protecting the health of South Carolinians.' It is in that spirit that we share our thoughts with you and the AccelerateSC Task Force on what we see as important items for consideration in the development of a path forward.

As legislators representing large swaths of our state's rural, poor, and underserved communities, we request that as CARES Act funding is allocated to address these needs, that a portion of those resources be directed to the following critical areas of concern.

COVID-19 testing and contact tracing are critical components in the successful reopening of our state and prevention of the transmission of the virus. Accordingly, testing and tracing should be expanded to include testing and tracing in rural South Carolina to determine the extent of COVID-19 positive individuals and prevent the spread of the disease. Up to this point, testing in rural, communities of color has been non-existent or marginal at best. Testing should be free and accessible by deploying mobile testing units where necessary to reach these rural populations. Testing should be offered when requested whether individuals are symptomatic or asymptomatic. CARES Act funding should be utilized to reach rural, poor, vulnerable communities of color with lifesaving COVID-19 testing and contact tracing to encourage residents to exercise physical distancing and safety precautions. Contact tracing is an important component of public health and has the potential to impact unemployment numbers by training unemployed people across the state to perform the tasks associated with contact tracing. The dual benefits of performing a much-needed public health service aimed at flattening the curve and providing gainful employment should not be underestimated.

Essential workers required to work during the pandemic and who often work in low-paying jobs, with little or no health insurance, paid sick leave or family leave, should be provided hazard pay, paid sick and family leave, and have access to affordable health care. CARES Act funds should be set aside to fill the gap and ensure that workers in essential jobs are provided these minimal safety and security assurances. South Carolinians required to work during a declared state of emergency should be provided the necessary personal protective equipment to keep them healthy and safe while on the job. This should not be optional or based upon the determination of employers of these essential workers.

As a priority, educational gaps in our state's public schools as a result of both the lack of access to broadband and the electronic devices needed to complete e-learning should be filled with CARES Act funds. Disparities in access to broadband have left students in rural parts of our state at a distinct disadvantage and have adversely impacted academic achievement for years. We cannot afford to let these disparities persist for another generation, leaving even more of our students unprepared for gainful employment. Further, the lack of access to broadband in rural areas of South Carolina impedes job searches, telemedicine and industry recruitment.

Black-owned businesses devastated by the coronavirus pandemic have not been successful in obtaining funds through the SBA, forcing many of them to close and others on the verge of shuttering and uncertainty about the likelihood of reopening. These small businesses are job creators and, in many communities, serve as a critical economic linchpin for the community. Black-owned businesses are the heart and soul of black communities across South Carolina and a state grant program targeted at these small businesses should be developed from CARES Act funding to allow them to remain viable.

CARES Act funds should be used to close governance funding gaps as a result of the pandemic in small towns and municipalities to allow for continued basic services like fire, EMS and water and sewer services. Small governing bodies, many of them in rural areas, have seen their revenue reduced dramatically as a result of increased unemployment of residents impacting their ability to pay local taxes. These local governments need immediate funding to prevent elimination of critical services to their citizens.

A culturally sensitive, public awareness campaign should be developed and targeted to rural communities of color across the state. The campaign should be designed and distributed on a variety of media platforms with a focus on changing behaviors and developing strategies to help flatten the curve in the black community.

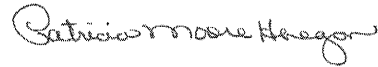
Directing some of the CARES Act resources to the items described in this letter must be considered a priority if we are to move South Carolina forward to a brighter future. As devastating as the pandemic has been for our state, nation and world, it has provided us with a unique opportunity to correct some longstanding, systemic injustices and provide equitable opportunities to all South Carolinians. Again, we commend you for creating AccelerateSC and we urge you to consider the points raised in this letter to include all of South Carolina as you move toward revitalizing our beautiful state.

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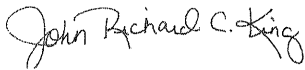
Sincerely,



Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter
President, NBCSL



Rep. Patricia Henegan
SC House District 54



Rep. John R. King
York County District 49
Immediate Past Chair
SC Legislative Black Caucus



Rep. Wendy C. Brawley
SC House District 70

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cc: AccelerateSC