



EVERY TEXAN

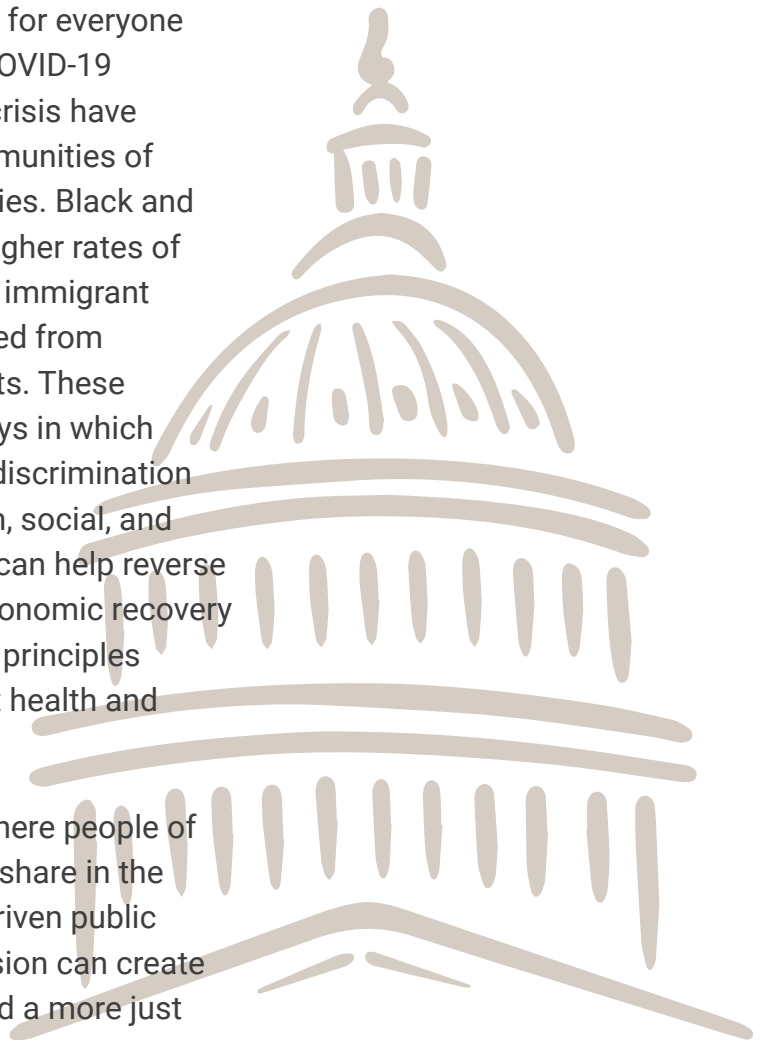
Formerly Center for Public Policy Priorities

Policy Roadmap *for a Just and Equitable Texas*

IN THE 87TH TEXAS LEGISLATIVE SESSION

In Texas, opportunity isn't the same for everyone – despite our state's wealth. The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing economic crisis have disproportionately harmed Texas communities of color and underscored existing inequities. Black and Latinx communities are dealing with higher rates of layoffs than their white neighbors, and immigrant families are being systemically excluded from state and federal COVID-19 relief efforts. These troubling inequities underscore the ways in which America's history of racism, bias, and discrimination have remained embedded in our health, social, and economic systems. Texas lawmakers can help reverse current trends and create a broader economic recovery by enacting policies that adhere to the principles of supporting Texans with the greatest health and economic needs.

At Every Texan, we envision a Texas where people of all backgrounds can contribute to and share in the prosperity of our state. Through fact-driven public policy, the 2021 Texas Legislative Session can create the systemic change necessary to build a more just and equitable Texas.



DECEMBER 2020



Ensuring Health and Wellness

For the health and well-being of Texas families, the Texas Legislature needs to provide access to affordable, high quality health care through insurance and high quality medical providers. Texas should not have the worst uninsured rate in the nation or create artificial barriers that prevent eligible Texans from accessing Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as "food stamps").

Legislative Policy Recommendations

Protect funding for health and human services during the pandemic and recovery, including rejecting cuts to eligibility systems that would harm Texans seeking health care, food and other basic needs assistance. Protect the state's ability to process applications.

Cover the growing number of Texans without health insurance, and support families hurt by the COVID-19 economic downturn.

- Accept the Medicaid expansion federal funding available right now to provide insurance for an estimated 2.2 million+ uninsured Texas adults, most of whom are working families, and 74% are Texans of color.
- Any Medicaid expansion must explicitly include adult immigrants who qualify for Medicaid under federal law.
- Provide 12 months of continuous eligibility for children on Medicaid. The best time to review eligibility and move children from Medicaid to CHIP is at renewal. This ensures a smooth transition and avoids eligible children losing coverage altogether. Texas currently uses a flawed process to frequently review which children are eligible for Medicaid. This inefficient process has mistakenly kicked thousands of eligible children off their health coverage every month.
- **Extend comprehensive Medicaid health insurance** for new mothers from the current two months of coverage after childbirth to a full year after delivery.
 - Under current law, new mothers in Texas get removed from Medicaid when their babies are two months old, putting the baby and the mother at risk.
 - Like Medicaid expansion, Texas must explicitly include immigrant mothers who qualify under federal law in this extended coverage. Under current law, Texas excludes lawfully present immigrant adult women from Medicaid Maternity coverage.

Strengthen private health insurance coverage for people who buy health insurance on their own by:

- Lowering health insurance premiums by adopting a reinsurance option under an Affordable Care Act ("1332") waiver.
- Addressing shortcomings of subpar health plans that lack protections for pre-existing conditions, offer only limited benefits or expose Texans to catastrophic costs in the event of illness or injury.

Reduce Texans' medical debt by:

- Expanding hospital financial assistance and charity care for struggling Texans and limiting debt collection.
- Closing the loophole that lets ambulances continue to send expensive surprise medical bills despite Texas' otherwise strong protections.

Revitalize and fund state-sponsored outreach and local enrollment assistance to help eligible Texans sign up for health care, food and other basic needs.

- Remove barriers to remote enrollment, including for Texans without internet access or smart phones. Beyond the pandemic, this will help Texans who are home-bound or who live in rural areas.
- Require the Health and Human Services Commission and other state agencies to update information and outreach materials to ensure clear and accurate language for mixed-immigrant status families. This is especially important in accessing COVID-19 testing and medical care and enrollment in health care coverage and food programs.

Remove barriers to enrollment in state women's health programs and make sure sufficient state funding and health providers are available to serve Texans in need of that care.

End hunger that harms children, adults, seniors and families of all races and ethnicities and places certain populations at higher risk for food insecurity. The lack of consistent access to healthy meals affects 1 in 4 Black and Latinx children in Texas, a rate more than twice as high as white children.

- Reduce barriers that deter Texas families from accessing the food they need to stay healthy.
- Update the restrictions on owning cars and other assets to qualify for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as "food stamps"). These rules don't currently reflect the impact of inflation or families' need to have reliable cars to keep their jobs.
- Increase access to SNAP for low-income college students who suffer from high rates of hunger.
- Improve Texas' woefully inadequate SNAP Employment & Training Program, and direct the Health and Human Services Commission to expand the program to third-party partnerships to access additional federal funding.

Improve Supports for Kinship Families

- Update the restrictions on owning cars and other assets to qualify for Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF) to allow grandparents and other caregivers in "kinship families" to meet the needs of the children in their care.
- Establish a statewide kinship navigator program to support grandparents and other relatives as they keep children out of the child welfare system.

Creating Quality Jobs and Boosting Financial Security



The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in significant loss of income for many Texans. Yet data shows us not all Texans have experienced these hardships to the same degree. Black Texans and women in the workforce have filed unemployment insurance claims at significantly higher rates than others. Even for those Texans who held onto full-time jobs, it is often still not enough to support a family and provide long-term security. Texans in low-wage employment are often forced to work multiple jobs to make ends meet and still have trouble paying for rent, food and reliable transportation. Low-wage workers also face challenges paying off debt while lacking the ability to save for a secure retirement. Texas leaders must prioritize legislation centering race equity responses that support unemployed and employed Texas workers, ensure employers pay livable wages and prioritize health and wellness over corporate profits.

Legislative Policy Recommendations

Enact statewide paid family and medical leave and paid sick leave. These commonsense policies establish a statewide minimum of protection when Texans get sick or allow cities and counties to enact policies that meet the needs of their communities.

Ensure high enough wages in Texas so that households and the Texas economy can thrive by:

- Enacting a statewide minimum wage that increases the low end of the wage scale for workers.
- Removing state rules that prevent cities and counties from raising local wages, so that communities can take action to address high costs of living.

Reform unemployment insurance to make sure benefits are adequate and that the insurance system does not put unnecessary hurdles in Texans' way. As we have seen during the pandemic, workers deserve wage protection when they lose a job through no fault of their own.

Enact and enforce **strict guidelines on classification of workers** so that hard-working Texans can still access unemployment benefits without fraudulent employers using loopholes to exempt them.

Investing in Public Schools



Education is the bedrock of an informed democracy and the bridge to lifelong opportunities. As a state, we rely on our public schools to develop a talented workforce and promote shared prosperity. But in order to fulfill our promise to the next generation of young Texans, we must first make sure there is sufficient opportunity and support for every kid to get a quality education, no matter their zip code or background.

Legislative Policy Recommendations

Make sure every student has access to a **well-funded and quality education** by:

- Investing more state funds in public education by **eliminating the inequitable school district tax compression** that favors some districts over others.
- **Addressing funding gaps for English Learner (EL) students**, especially in grades PreK-3 and those in rural districts and elsewhere who can't access dual language programs.
- Ensuring a more accurate accounting of student needs by **using average daily enrollment** to calculate school funding instead of average daily attendance. The pandemic showed how problematic basing funding on attendance can be.

Investing in Higher Education



More and more Texas students are people of color who come from low-income backgrounds. Such demographic shifts require more state investment in higher education. As more students are the first in their families to attend college and more students from low-income backgrounds enter higher education, colleges need more resources to ensure students can be as successful as their peers that have had lifelong access to increased resources.

Legislative Policy Recommendations

Ensure every Texan can afford a **higher education** by:

- Expanding affordable access to college by protecting and increasing **investment in need-based financial aid programs**.
- Reducing student loan debt and passing legislation that **protects student borrowers from predatory lending**.
- **Eliminating tuition & fees for low-income families**.
- Investing in **sustained emergency aid programs** for all students.
- Increasing **access to needed benefits for students**, including SNAP.



Reforming Immigration

Texas depends more than ever on immigrants. Immigrant workers fortify the construction and agricultural industries and have been on the front lines of the COVID-19 crisis. After the 2019 massacre in El Paso and a global pandemic that has disproportionately affected immigrants, Texas leaders should end the politics of hate and the rhetoric of immigrant-bashing and adopt policies that support the valuable contribution of Texas immigrants.

Legislative Policy Recommendations

Expand access to **drivers license permits** for every Texan, including immigrants that lack the documentation for a Texas Driver's License. Many working immigrants have lived in fear of driving their kids to school or driving to work in Texas without a valid driver's license because they lack the necessary documentation. Currently, 15 states and the District of Columbia have successfully implemented programs that grant access to drivers permits to all of their residents for safety, economic and health reasons.

Explicitly **include immigrants and immigrant mothers** who qualify under federal law for **Medicaid and Medicaid Maternity Coverage**. Comprehensive Medicaid health insurance coverage for prenatal care and new mothers is crucial for their health, and Texas must end its current inhumane policy that excludes lawfully present immigrant adult women from this coverage. Similarly, **Texas is one of only six states that exclude adult immigrants with permanent status from Medicaid altogether.**

Repeal the xenophobic state law SB4 so that local law enforcement and officials can establish their own immigration enforcement priorities based on the safety needs of their community. This will make sure immigrants continue to contribute to and participate in the Texas economy, especially following a natural disaster or pandemic.



Reforming Budget and Tax Policy

The COVID-19 pandemic's damaging effects on the economy and on state revenue can be mitigated if Texas lawmakers tap into the state's Economic Stabilization Fund (Rainy Day Fund). This savings account is designed for times like these in order to avoid cuts to education, health care, higher education and other public services that rely on general tax revenue. Some budget savings could come from cuts to state border security or prison closures, but lawmakers should not cut education and health care and leave billions of dollars unspent in the Rainy Day Fund. Texas needs a budget and tax system that is equitable, adequate and responsive to our state's growing population and needs. The ability to invest in public schools and health care that will build a more prosperous future for every Texan relies on the ability of our tax system to support those services.

Legislative Policy Recommendations

Use the Economic Stabilization Fund (Rainy Day Fund) as it was intended to avoid cuts to education, health care and other services essential to the livelihood of Texans in times like these.

Do not reauthorize the massive school property tax giveaway program (Chapter 313) that gives corporations unnecessary tax breaks. Instead, use that revenue for public schools, health care and higher education.

Modernize our tax system and eliminate wasteful tax giveaways to improve equity and raise the revenue Texas needs as it grows.

Implement property tax limits based on property owners' ability to pay, referred to as "circuit breakers."

In Texas, opportunity isn't the same for everyone. We can use public policy to build a more just and equitable future for every Texan. By fully funding our public health systems, ensuring workers have access to paid leave, reforming tax policies and more, we can make sure Texas' hard-working families are able to thrive — even in a pandemic.