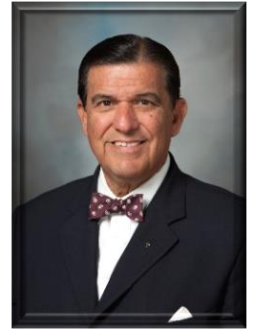




STATE SENATOR EDDIE LUCIO, JR. DISTRICT 27



Austin Capitol Office
P.O. Box 12068
Austin, TX 78711
512-463-0127

Cameron District Office
800 N. Interstate 69E, Ste. 7
Brownsville, TX 78521
956-548-0227

Hidalgo District Office
1210 W Interstate 2, Ste. 10
Pharr, Texas 78577
956-787-5227

A Strategic Texas Investment: Putting the Well-being of Texans First by Expanding Medicaid in Texas

04-14-20 -- Opinion Editorial by Senator Eddie Lucio, Jr. (D-Brownsville)

In the last couple of weeks, our state has asked much from Texans as it strives to contain the COVID-19 outbreak. Texas Governor Greg Abbott and Texas Department of State Health Services Commissioner John Hellerstedt have requested through their public health orders that all Texans stay at home as much as possible unless they are involved in an essential service, or need to engage in essential activities, like going to the pharmacy or getting groceries. In order to flatten the curve of COVID-19 patients, when out in the public, Texans have been asked to practice social distancing and engage in good hygiene.

It is inspiring to see so many Texans raise the standard and meet what state leaders have asked from them to help keep our family, friends, and neighbors healthy. Unfortunately, following promulgated orders to refrain from non-essential activities has taken its toll on many. Regrettably, for example, it has caused thousands "non-essential" businesses to close their doors and has resulted in massive layoffs. Displaced workers have also lost their employer-based health insurance leaving them to fend for themselves to stay healthy and to take care of their families. These are some of the consequences that have been experienced for the sake of safeguarding Texas' public health system from being overwhelmed by the pandemic.

Thankfully, the federal government has stepped up to help by providing unemployment benefits under the federal CARES Act to those negatively impacted by the public health crisis. The sheer number of layoffs has created a record-breaking number of unemployment claims and created a backlog of applications to be processed. As news outlets have reported, many Texans providing critical services are earning low salaries and are struggling to hang on to their jobs while they have no health insurance. Knowing that before the COVID-19 outbreak, Texas had the highest rate of uninsured residents in the nation, it is reasonable to foresee that the great number of displaced workers will likely also cause similar bottlenecks for health care services in our public health system. Unfortunately, because laid off Texans also lost their work-based health insurance, many will be forced to rely on our hospitals and emergency rooms when they become sick. As a result, thousands of unemployed Texans lacking health coverage may likely strain, if not overwhelm, the very health care system that promulgated public health orders are aimed at protecting.

Just like our federal government rose above divisive ideologies to stand by Americans in need of help with the federal CARES Act, displaced and working-poor Texans are in need for the State of Texas to help them through the COVID-19 outbreak by providing them increased opportunities for affordable health coverage. That is why unemployed Texans, and their families, are asking the only statewide elected official who has the executive authority to increase health care opportunities by expanding Medicaid coverage in Texas. That is why, with the best interest of our constituents, displaced workers and working-poor, I respectfully implore Governor Abbott to answer the cry of our constituents and diminish the devastating impact of COVID-19 to uninsured Texans by expanding Medicaid coverage in the Lone Star State.

As the media and different studies have reported, expanding Medicaid in our state would allow Texas to draw down an estimated \$100 billion in federal funding over the decade. This expansion would also help save approximately \$5.5 billion annually in uncompensated care from hospital, emergency room visits from the uninsured. Increased health care coverage opportunities and leveraging of federal funds can all happen if Texas invests in the well-being of the backbone of our state

economy, our fellow Texans. In order to protect our public health system and to help Texas be open for business, with the utmost respect, I reiterate my request to Governor Abbott to continue to stand alongside our constituents, and put Texas on the right side of the increasing health care coverage opportunities by expanding Medicaid in our state.

What the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us is that the time to act is now. Texans in need can be helped remain healthy and not flood our emergency rooms with preventable health care visits if our state invests in their well-being by providing them accessible, affordable health insurance opportunities by Texas expanding Medicaid coverage today.

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Senator Eddie Lucio, Jr. (D – Brownsville) represents Cameron, Hidalgo, Kenedy, Kleberg, and Willacy Counties. He is the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Intergovernmental Relations; Vice Chairman of the Senate Committee on Education; Member of the Senate Committees on State Affairs; Veteran Affairs & Border Security; and of the Select Committees on Redistricting; and, Texas Ports. He is member of the Sunset Advisory Commission and has been an ex-officio member of the DSHS Task Force of Border Public Health Officials since 2017. Elected in 1991, Lucio is third in seniority in the Texas Senate.