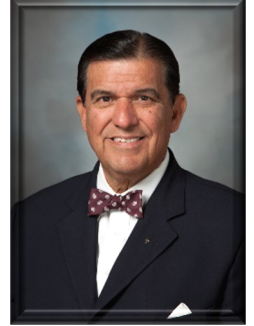




STATE SENATOR EDDIE LUCIO, JR. DISTRICT 27



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

Sen. Lucio Requests Extension of Soon-to-Expire COVID-19 Surge Testing

Before impending July 14 expiration, request Governor extend testing and increase its accessibility to more Valley families

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

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Contact: Daniel Esparza, Legislative Director
(512) 463-0127

AUSTIN, TX – Today, Senator Eddie Lucio, Jr. (D-Brownsville) released his July 10 letter to Governor Greg Abbott and Chief Nim Kidd (from the Texas Division on Emergency Management) requesting the Surge Testing that is set to expire at 6 PM on July 14 to be extended another week in Cameron County.

On July 7, Sen. Lucio joined Gov. Abbott in announcing the first ever COVID-19 surge testing collaboration between the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Texas to offer 5,000 tests per day from July 8th to July 14th which would be in operation in Edinburg, Texas' Ogden Arena.

In his letter Sen. Lucio wrote, *"as the Rio Grande Valley continues to shoulder the brunt of the alarmingly expanding coronavirus outbreak, we are all thankful that our state and federal agencies are acting on our outcry for help by providing surge response in free COVID-19 testing that is necessary to protect the families and residents we represent."* Commenting on this unique state - federal collaboration that would provide a total of 35,000 greatly needed coronavirus tests, Sen. Lucio went on to say, *"I continue to be thankful for your great assistance and leadership on this matter and commend the productive partnership that you have established with federal agencies."*

The Brownsville native Senator then informed our state's leaders in charge of spearheading Texas' COVID-19 response, *"I am saddened to report, however, that the implementation of regional Surge Testing has many challenges that are making the accessibility of this greatly needed testing out of reach of our Cameron & Willacy County residents, who are among the most economically challenged Texans in our state. I have heard from families, health professionals, and community leaders who have all informed me that this great tool, which can greatly help curb the spread of the coronavirus outbreak, has been a source of frustration to many of the 1.2 million Texans who reside in Cameron and Hidalgo Counties."*

Sen. Lucio shared the challenging geographic obstacles that low-income families are experiencing with the current Edinburg testing site. He explained to Gov. Abbott, *"For example, if you are a resident in Brownsville or South Padre Island, you are required to travel over one-hour to the Edinburg test site. This is tantamount to having a low-income resident of North Austin travel to San Antonio to attempt to receive a greatly needed free COVID-19 test."*

Echoing the concerns of low-income families that have reached out to Sen. Lucio, he further explained, *"additionally, if you happened to be a Cameron County resident with pre-existing conditions and are experiencing dangerous signs of COVID-19, not only must you find the means to drive an hour to get to the test site, you must also endure the long wait time. If you have high blood pressure, and experiencing chest pains, this wait can be unbearable."*

Having been in communication with the medical community and local officials in his district, Sen. Lucio informed the Governor, *"Members of our health community and constituents in Cameron County have shared with me their heart wrenching stories of driving to the test site and waiting all day to only be told to try again the following day. Knowing that Cameron County has no public hospital and lacks the resources to have a health care district, I respectfully request that you extend the Surge Testing initiative and locate it in Cameron County."*

Advocating for low-income families in his district, Sen. Lucio laid out the case to Governor Abbott how Cameron County is among one of the most economically challenged counties of the state and how the accelerated coronavirus outbreak has worsened the economic outlook of families in the region. Sen. Lucio explained,

"As the deadly coronavirus continues to spread at dangerously accelerated levels, regrettably it has transformed our county into a hotbed of community spread infections. Frustratingly, not only do our 423,000 constituents in Cameron County lack a public hospital and a health care district, these families are among the poorest in the state. Whereas Texas has 14.9% of persons living in poverty, Cameron County unfortunately has nearly twice as many persons living in poverty with 27.9%. Additionally, our percentage of persons without health insurance in Cameron County is alarmingly higher than the statewide percentage for Texas. While the percent of individuals in the state without health insurance is 20%, the percent in Cameron County is 10.2% higher than in Texas, with 30.2%.

To worsen the gravity of the unique challenges in my home county, as the Texas Tribune reported on June 25, Texans are struggling to work in my district. As you are aware, our local border economy, which is dependent on international commerce and trade, has been devastated by the pandemic. The Texas Workforce Commission reported in May, that while Texas' unemployment rate was 13%, unfortunately the unemployment rate was significantly higher for the Brownsville - Harlingen MSA with 17.1%. The Tribune reported, "in the Rio Grande Valley, the lack of jobs is even more pronounced. The region's unemployment rate in May was 17.1%, well above the statewide rate of 13%."

The Rio Grande Valley Senator then conveyed the sentiments of his constituents and members of the medical profession, *"Governor and Chief Kidd, families in Cameron & Willacy Counties are scared and health professionals who rely on the greater equitable regional distribution of assets are frustrated with disproportionate resources to the rest of the Rio Grande Valley. Many unemployed poor families have used their limited means to make the one-hour drive to the Edinburg testing site and endured the long wait times to only be told they could not be helped. Today, these noteworthy families are turning to you for hope and relief."* Sen. Lucio continued, *"From the bottom of my heart, I humbly implore you to extend the Surge Testing to among the most economically challenged constituents we represent who are facing unfathomable odds in trying to keep their loved ones healthy in the face of the deadly COVID-19 outbreak."*

Being aware that the Surge Testing is a collaborative initiative between the federal HHS and the State of Texas, Sen. Lucio asked Gov. Abbott and Chief Kidd to work with members of the Valley Congressional Delegation. Sen. Lucio wrote, *"As a firm believer that we can and need to continue working with our federal counterparts to protect the lives of the families and children that we represent, I respectfully ask you to work with our Congressional Delegation. Being guided by the Texas "Can-Do Spirit," I am convinced that Congressman Filemon Vela, Congressman Vicente Gonzalez can greatly assist you to acquire the necessary support and assistance from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to provide greatly needed Surge COVID19 Testing to the good people of Cameron County."*

Today Sen. Lucio commented on his July 10 letter to Gov. Abbott and Chief Kidd, "As I stated in my correspondence, this is a very deadly pandemic which requires us all to work together, beyond party labels. We must everything we can to strengthen the state's effort to address the needs of our constituents, especially our low-income families and children."

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Attachments:

- **2020.07.10 Gov Abbott - Accessibility to COVID-19 Surge Testing greatly needed in Cameron County.pdf**
- **2020-07-11 PRESS RELEASE - Sen Lucio requests extension of COVID-19 Surge Testing before July 14 expiration.pdf**

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.