Speaker Tim Moore  
16 West Jones Street  
Room 2304  
Raleigh, NC 27601  

RE: Recommendations to the House Select Committee on COVID-19  

Dear Speaker Moore and Members of the House Select Committee on COVID-19,  

First, I write on behalf of NC Child to thank you for the work that the General Assembly has done to protect families and fight the spread of COVID-19 thus far. The priorities addressed in the COVID-19 Recovery Act are integral to meeting the needs of North Carolina’s children through this period. We are grateful for the thoughtful, collaborative process that the Committee used to put together this legislation, and for the opportunity to provide input.  

We particularly want to thank you for inclusion of the following priorities requested by NC Child and our partner organizations across the state:  

- Authorization of temporary Medicaid coverage for COVID-19 testing of some uninsured individuals;  
- Funding for school nutrition services;  
- $19 million to the NC Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) to support food banks, residential settings, child care, food and nutrition, technology upgrades to NCCARE360, and other areas;  
- Prioritization of child care workers within plans for COVID-19 antibody testing and the state personal protective equipment stockpile;  
- $6 million to state food banks to support them in fighting hunger; and  
- Additional foster care supports, including cash assistance to foster families.  

These steps are sorely needed to help families through this time of unprecedented hardship. Yet unfortunately, they are not sufficient to meet the need that COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated across North Carolina. Your continued leadership is needed to ensure that children’s families and communities are strong enough to support their well-being during this crisis and through the recovery period. It is imperative that we act quickly, and use every tool available to ensure that North Carolina’s families and economy bounce back from this crisis. We urge you to act swiftly in expending the full amount of emergency funding allocated to North Carolina via the CARES Act.  

As the House Select Committee on COVID-19 continues to meet, we respectfully submit the following priorities for consideration as you consider additional COVID-19 relief:  

1. Enact the Child Care Emergency Economic Support Package, put forth by the NC Early Education Coalition, to assure the availability of emergency child care and prevent the collapse of North Carolina’s early education system.
The COVID-19 Recovery Act contained an initial, unspecified amount of emergency funding for child care within a $19 million allocation to NCDHHS, but much more is needed to ensure that North Carolina’s parents can get back to work. We remain concerned that without significant additional funding, the state’s child care sector will not survive this crisis intact, and centers that have now closed will be unable to reopen during the recovery period. Only half of North Carolina’s licensed child care programs are currently open. We support the full recommendations of the Child Care Emergency Economic Package,\(^1\) and we urge the NC General Assembly to move swiftly in appropriating funding.

2. **Pass the FIBER Act to increase access to broadband internet statewide.**

Resources and supports for families, including all of K-12 education, have been transitioned online, despite a deep divide in high-speed internet access across the state. A huge chasm is developing between students in those regions that have strong high-speed internet access, and those in mostly rural areas that do not. We urge the General Assembly to build on the technology supports in the COVID-19 Recovery Act by allowing local government investments in broadband infrastructure, ensuring more equitable access to emergency benefit enrollment, virtual healthcare, remote learning, and other critical programs for families.

3. **Allocate emergency funding to build the technology capacity of the child welfare system and protect the well-being of children in kinship care.**

During this crisis, children in North Carolina’s child welfare system are at heightened risk of increased anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and are much more vulnerable to human trafficking. For each of the recommendations below, we urge the NC General Assembly to direct NC DHHS to estimate the amount needed, and then to provide funding as quickly as possible:

- Allocate funding to enable virtual child welfare visitation and virtual court hearings, including tools for social workers, children, and families (including foster families).
- We thank the NC General Assembly for its efforts to keep children in stable homes by allocating direct cash assistance to foster families. However, family members who are caring for children outside of the foster care system are not eligible for the financial assistance made available to licensed foster families under the COVID-19 Recovery Act. There are approximately 2,300 children statewide in ‘kinship care’ foster care arrangements. Kinship care is crucial for children’s wellbeing, as it allows children to avoid entering into non-relative care. We urge the NC General Assembly to make the same financial assistance available to families providing kinship care, as to licensed foster families.

4. **Ensure that School Nutrition Services have adequate funding to continue feeding children through the end of the school calendar year.**

We are so grateful to the NC General Assembly for allocating $75 million for school nutrition services. The local feeding programs supported by these funds are absolutely essential, as hunger is dramatically rising across our state due to the pandemic. School feeding sites have become lifelines in local

\(^1\) NC Early Education Coalition “Child Care Emergency Economic Support Package,” March 2020
communities. However, the funding allocated was only adequate to cover the need through the original period of school closures, which ends May 15. With schools now closed through the end of the calendar year, $16 million of additional funding will be required to continue these feeding programs into June, when federal summer feeding programs kick in to prevent hunger among school-aged children.

5. Ensure that everyone in North Carolina has access to paid sick days and family leave in order to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to recent research, only 12% of North Carolinians have access to paid family and medical leave. Further, 38% of North Carolina’s workforce has no paid sick time. The federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act provides paid sick leave and paid family leave benefits to some individuals, but these protections only apply to those who work for employers with fewer than 500 employees. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, over 800,000 individuals in North Carolina work for employers with 500 or more employees, and thus are left out of the recently enacted federal protections.

We urge the NC General Assembly close the gaps left by federal emergency policies during this pandemic by:

- Passing H 1046, COVID-19 Paid Sick Leave. Require private-sector employers with 500 or more employees to provide 80 hours of paid sick time to both full- and part-time workers at 100 percent wage replacement; and
- Preventing the exclusion of health care providers and emergency responders from the federal emergency paid sick days and emergency paid leave provisions by requiring their employers to follow the federal provisions outlined for other employers under federal law.

Finally and critically, we join the NC Health Care Association, Care4Carolina, and hundreds of health systems and business leaders across the state in calling on the NC General Assembly to immediately:

6. Do everything in your power to cover North Carolina’s uninsured, including accepting the federal funds to expand the NC Medicaid program.

North Carolina is missing out on billions in federal health care funding to fight COVID-19 and promote economic recovery. Our hospitals and health care systems report that collectively they are losing over $1 billion each month. Expanding Medicaid would bring more than $11 billion in federal health care funds to North Carolina between 2020 and 2022, according to recent estimates from the Cone Health Foundation. This is funding our health care providers desperately need.

Since the pandemic began, hundreds of thousands of North Carolinians have lost their jobs and their employer-provided health insurance. Allowing the numbers of uninsured to grow will harm family finances, continue to undermine health systems, and create further obstacles to economic recovery. You have the power to cut the number of uninsured in half immediately, using federal funding. Expanding Medicaid now will bolster our health systems and families against the pandemic and create a glide path towards economic recovery when this crisis is over.

Thank you for your work. We stand ready to assist you with further information and support regarding all of the areas discussed above. Please feel free to contact me directly at admin@ncchild.org and 919-834-6623.
Sincerely,

Michelle Hughes
Executive Director