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OP-ED

How to provide children with food security, educational access, income support and health care access during the coronavirus

By JAY SICKLICK
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Crises beget ingenuity, bold ideas and creative solutions. The coronavirus outbreak is arguably one of the most significant crises that our nation and much of the rest of the world has faced. The governor has declared a state of emergency, which will help route resources and policies to a proactive approach to ensuring health and safety, in a broad sense.

But let's not forget who are most vulnerable as activities, schools and much of our cities shut down: children and youth who are low-income, who reside in state care or who have recently come to this country seeking safety and opportunity. It is our moral, ethical and legal duty to advocate for our youngest residents, especially when emergency policies designed to protect public health can subsequently have devastating consequences for those at risk.

To address the unique needs of this population, the Center for Children's Advocacy proposes that the state immediately enact four policies designed to address the critical areas that touch all children's lives, namely: food security, educational access, income support, and health care access.

Food security: The State Department of Education (SDE) can replicate its extraordinarily successful Summer Food Service Program and Summer Seamless Option in order to support the approximately 170,000 students who will not receive free or subsidized breakfasts and lunches in school districts shuttered during the crisis. For the 12 percent of students in Connecticut who qualify for free- or reduced-cost school meals, a community-based food service program allows the most food-insecure to benefit from one hot meal per day.

Educational access: SDE should plan now for a full summer school schedule for all students who wish to enroll. While online learning is a viable option for many, 14 percent of Connecticut households do not have internet access, making it virtually impossible for many low-income students to engage in meaningful online learning when attendance at brick and mortar schools is not an option. SDE and local school districts should think creatively about full-day summer school programs. Now is the time to seize the opportunity to enrich academics, social development and physical education — especially in the state's lowest performing districts to support students who can least afford to miss even a few days of school.

Income support: The state's comprehensive and innovative paid family leave policy, scheduled to start in 2021, should be immediately implemented and enhanced during the state of emergency (and beyond, if necessary), to provide income support to those who need to care for sick children and to those who must care for children due to school closures. Income security is crucial to keep at-risk families intact, to prevent homelessness and to help alleviate the inevitable sense of anxiety likely to descend upon economically vulnerable families.

Health care access: HUSKY Health, the state's public health coverage program for low-income children and families, should be expanded to all income eligible families, including undocumented children and parents. If the virus does not clinically discriminate based on race, economic status or country of origin, children and parents who are vulnerable due to their immigration status should not be precluded from seeking health care due to lack of coverage. Emergency access to health insurance will not cure the outbreak, but it will certainly allow those who are most vulnerable to address medical issues without reservation or fear of rejection.

In hindsight, state leaders and advocates will not be judged by how we react to those who are most vocal and aware, but by how we support those who are most at risk and vulnerable. We have the means and tools at our disposal to support Connecticut's children. Let's not be remembered for leaving them behind when they need us the most.

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