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LETITIA JAMES
ATTORNEY GENERAL

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July 29, 2021

Will Castleberry
Vice President, State Policy & Community Engagement
Facebook, Inc.
1299 Pennsylvania Avenue
Suite 800
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Mr. Castleberry:

I write on behalf of my office and the undersigned groups. Misinformation is undermining the country's efforts to end the pandemic and exacerbating racial disparities in COVID-19 vaccination rates. People are using social media platforms to disseminate not only misinformation but disinformation about vaccines, encouraging vaccine hesitancy among Americans. As new virus variants emerge and infection rates begin to rise again, it is critically important that social media companies take stronger action to combat misinformation and encourage vulnerable communities to get vaccinated.

The disparities in vaccination rates are most acute with the Latino community. For example, only 15.4 percent of Latino people have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, compared to 59.8 percent of white, non-Hispanic people.¹ A recent study found that 51 percent of Latino people who have yet to be vaccinated have concerns regarding its safety and efficacy.² Among primarily Spanish-speaking people, this number increases to 67 percent.³ The data highlights the urgent need to disseminate accurate information within this community, especially in the Spanish language and dialects.

¹ *Demographic Characteristics of People Receiving COVID-19 Vaccinations in the United States*, CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION: COVID DATA TRACKER, <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#vaccination-demographic> (last visited July 9, 2021).

² See Voto Latino, *NEW STUDY: Facebook is Primary Driver of Covid-19 Misinformation in the Latinx Community, Fueling Vaccine Hesitancy*, CISION: PR NEWSWIRE (Apr. 21, 2021, 14:44 ET), <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/new-study-facebook-is-primary-driver-of-covid-19-misinformation-in-the-latinx-community-fueling-vaccine-hesitancy-301274152.html> (last visited July 9, 2021).

³ *Id.*

In addition to sharing accurate information, more must be done to stop the false information that is pervasive on social media platforms. According to a survey conducted on behalf of the Latino Anti-Disinformation Lab, almost 40 percent of Latino respondents said that they had been exposed to material that made them believe the COVID-19 vaccines are neither safe nor effective.⁴ Twenty percent said that they had directly received false or harmful information through sources like Facebook and messaging apps and 78 percent said they believed misinformation to be a somewhat serious or very serious problem in their community.⁵ In order to assuage people's concerns, social media platforms must work to address and dispel harmful and inaccurate myths about the virus and the vaccines.

Recent reports suggest that Facebook could do more to respond to Spanish-language misinformation.⁶ One report found that only 30 percent of false information in Spanish is flagged and accompanied by a warning label on the platform compared to 70 percent of similar content in English.⁷ A video in Spanish that stated that the COVID-19 virus was created in a Chinese lab was allowed to circulate for 22 days unchecked and ultimately received 33 million views.⁸ With Facebook as the primary platform of choice for most Latino social media users,⁹ it is critical that Facebook improve its Spanish-language moderation and efforts to combat misleading information.

We understand that the approach to combatting misinformation must differ across Facebook's products and platforms. For example, we understand that WhatsApp maintains end-to-end encryption but has made strides in the fight against misinformation including by limiting the number of times a message can be forwarded and affixing a magnifying glass to highly-forwarded messages, which allows Google-searches of the content of the message.¹⁰ However, that puts the burden on the WhatsApp user to do their own fact-checking, and most users are more likely to trust information shared by a friend or family member. Another option would be to perform on-device fact-checking of previously-labeled misinformation. This approach could present the recipient with a symbol indicating that the content has been labeled misinformation or, in more dire circumstances, could prevent further sharing of the content.¹¹

We must make sure that the Latino community is protected from the dual viruses of misinformation and COVID-19. Facebook has a responsibility to monitor all its platforms and to amplify scientifically accurate messaging about this critical public health issue. The Latinx community should not be targeted nor misinformed, especially when they have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 both in terms of case rates and unemployment.¹² Facebook has a critical role to play in building trust and knowledge so that more Latinx people across the country get the right information and get vaccinated.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ See Kari Paul, 'Facebook Has a Blind Spot': Why Spanish-Language Misinformation is Flourishing, THE GUARDIAN (Mar. 3, 2021, 6:00 AM), <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/mar/03/facebook-spanish-language-misinformation-covid-19-election> (last accessed July 9, 2021).

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Jennifer Still, *How to Use WhatsApp's Fact-Checking Feature to Research the Validity of Viral, Forwarded Messages*, INSIDER (Oct. 2, 2020, 4:27 PM), <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-to-use-whatsapp-fact-check> (last accessed July 13, 2021).

¹¹ See Julio C. S. Reis et al., *Can WhatsApp Benefit from Debunked Fact-Checked Stories to Reduce Misinformation?*, HARV. KENNEDY SCH.: MISINFORMATION REV. (Aug. 20, 2020), <https://misinfoview.hks.harvard.edu/article/can-whatsapp-benefit-from-debunked-fact-checked-stories-to-reduce-misinformation/> (last accessed July 13, 2021).

¹² See Ryan Zamarripa & Lorena Roque, *Latinos Face Disproportionate Health and Economic Impacts From COVID-19*, CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS (Mar. 5, 2021, 8:55 AM), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2021/03/05/496733/latinos-face-disproportionate-health-economic-impacts-covid-19/> (last accessed July 9, 2021).

We request that Facebook share with our office its policies and procedures regarding misinformation targeted towards the Latino community as well as any initiatives that Facebook has underway to amplify evidence-based and scientifically accurate material to Latino users. The recent CDC-launched WhatsApp chat, “Mi Chat Sobre Vacunas COVID” is an example of a positive initiative that should be replicated across platforms.¹³ Facebook should also publish data on how much virus or vaccine-related misinformation it is encountering and how often it is taking action, similar to the other metrics it reports on as part of its quarterly Community Standards Enforcement Report.¹⁴

Specifically, we request the following:

1. Explain what tools Facebook uses to monitor Spanish-language and Latino-targeted misinformation regarding the COVID-19 virus and vaccines across its platforms, including WhatsApp and Instagram:
 - a. What kinds of actions are taken when misinformation is identified on the platforms?
 - b. How does Facebook account for the fact that it flags so much less misinformation in Spanish compared with in English?
 - c. What keywords does Facebook’s AI use to identify misinformation in both Spanish and English?
 - d. Does Facebook consider other Spanish-language dialects and consult with appropriate experts to determine its keyword choices?
 - e. Are human reviewers used to identify misinformation in Spanish and, if so, how does the number of reviewers compare to the number of English language reviewers?
 - f. Does Facebook rely on user reports for this kind of misinformation and, if so, what is the average review and response time?
 - g. What strategies is Facebook using to fight misinformation disseminated through WhatsApp, where messages are encrypted end-to-end?

2. Explain what steps Facebook is taking to disseminate evidence-based, scientifically accurate information on the virus and the vaccines to the Latinx community across its platforms, including WhatsApp and Instagram:
 - a. Is this information available in Spanish and Spanish dialects?
 - b. Can users easily choose which language they wish to use to view this information?
 - c. Is Facebook able to target users by their racial or ethnic demography?
 - d. How does Facebook ensure Latino users receive this information or are directed to the platform’s COVID-19 Information Center?
 - e. How often is information on COVID-19 updated on the platform and do those updates happen simultaneously in English and Spanish?

We ask that you provide the requested information on or before August 12, 2021. Should you have any questions, please contact Jarret Hova, Senior Policy Counsel, at 212-416-8587 or jarret.hova@ag.ny.gov. We appreciate your prompt attention to this matter.

¹³ See Carmen Sestin, *CDC Launches Covid-19 WhatsApp Chat in Spanish to Spur More Latino Vaccinations*, NBC NEWS (June 21, 2021, 12:08 PM), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/cdc-launches-covid-19-whatsapp-chat-spanish-spur-latino-vaccinations-rcna1235> (last accessed July 9, 2021).

¹⁴ *Community Standards Enforcement Report: Q1 2021 Report*, FACEBOOK (May 2021), <https://transparency.fb.com/data/community-standards-enforcement> (last visited July 13, 2021).

Sincerely,



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NEW YORK STATE ATTORNEY GENERAL

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