

Federal and State Relief Should Help All: Immigrants Should Not Be Left Behind

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DURING THIS TIME OF CRISIS, THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC, federal and state governments need to ensure that all of us, regardless of immigration status and the job we hold in society, are safe, healthy, and have access to critical services. No one should be left to struggle on their own during a global pandemic. As a society, we want to encourage everyone who is sick to stay home from work and have access to medical care if they need it. Now is the time to protect all community members by providing access to Medicaid, unemployment insurance, paid sick leave, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and more. FPI has developed a list of policy recommendations that the federal and New York State government should take into consideration to ensure that everyone is provided with the support that they need during these hard times.

Ensure Health Care Coverage Regardless of Immigration Status

During this time of crisis, it is important to ensure that all people, regardless of immigration status, have access to health care. At the end of March, New York State government rightly determined that emergency Medicaid should be available to all New Yorkers, regardless of immigration status or other exclusions, to cover testing for COVID-19, evaluation and treatment.

Other states should follow New York's lead in ensuring testing and treatment for all. This crisis shows dramatically that we are all in this together and excluding a group of immigrants from coverage is damaging to all of us.

At the same time, however, New York State may proceed with \$2.5 billion in cuts to Medicaid proposed by the governor prior to the coronavirus. This is surely the wrong time to be trying to reduce health care funding.

Ensure that All Workers Can Apply for Unemployment Insurance

New York State must fill in some important gaps in the unemployment insurance system. The federal emergency programs made many significant, if temporary, strides in unemployment insurance. But the federal programs systematically exclude undocumented immigrants, who make up about five percent of all workers¹ in New York State.

To expand unemployment insurance to undocumented immigrants would require a separate fund in New York. Senator Jessica Ramos has proposed creating that fund as a part of an overall proposal for raising new revenues.

Undocumented immigrants who work in hotels, restaurants and other businesses drastically hit by the economic shutdown are currently without jobs and need temporary economic support just as their U.S. citizen coworkers do. It is in no one's interest to make it necessary for them to go out and work during the coronavirus.

In addition to developing a program to help undocumented immigrants, New York should also make improvements to the unemployment system that will help immigrants as well as many other New Yorkers. The state should cover "gig economy" workers and others who are misclassified or are independent contractors and upgrade the state's most-restrictive-in-the-nation rules for part time workers. While federal aid will improve the level of benefits for a short period of time, New York should permanently increase its wage replacement level, which is far below the national average.

Provide Safety Equipment and Pay Increases for Essential Workers

Companies such as [Target, Walmart and Amazon](#) have implemented temporary pay increases and special bonuses for hourly wage workers. Some have also made sure that their workers have appropriate masks, gloves, and other equipment to protect themselves and their customers. These workers, many of them immigrants, are putting themselves at risk. The least we can do is to make sure they are paid a living wage and kept as safe on the job as possible.

Also, [companies such as Apple and Facebook have come together to donate supplies](#), such as masks, to these workers. However, the government should either provide the supplies or require employers to do so, at no cost to employees.

It is not a choice for these workers to choose to work rather than self-quarantine. They do not have the option to work from home because their stores and services are essential. Providing protective equipment and paying decent wages should be a standard that is extended across all essential job categories.

Provide Rent, Mortgage and Utility Payment Suspension

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, many immigrants are experiencing layoffs as businesses shut down. A loss of income makes it hard for individuals and families to pay their rents, mortgages and other bills. In order to ensure individuals are not forced into unnecessary debt or homelessness, a policy is needed to suspend or assist with rent, mortgage and utility payments. This will ensure that homelessness does not increase and prevents shelters from becoming overburdened.

Refugee Resettlement Agencies Can Help in Their Communities

This is an important moment to reinforce the capacity of our state's outstanding network of refugee resettlement agencies. In 2017, New York State developed the \$2 million Enhanced Services for Refugees Program. This is an important moment to expand on that. Resettlement agencies are anchor institutions in their communities, helping families who may otherwise have a hard time understanding

how best to navigate the very complex environment during the coronavirus, and providing access to services that range from health care to employment support.

Stop the Detainment of Undocumented Immigrants by ICE

During this time, the government should be encouraging everyone, regardless of immigration status, to seek the medical care and the services that they need. By continuing to spread fear throughout the undocumented community, it puts everyone at greater risk of the coronavirus because undocumented immigrants may be scared to seek medical attention if needed. Detention centers also put people at higher risk of contracting COVID-19 because of the high volume of people in small spaces. The federal government should stop the detention of undocumented immigrants and the separation of families, especially during this global pandemic, to ensure the safety and health of all people. [In ordinary times, ICE limits enforcement actions in what it considers “sensitive locations,”](#) such as hospitals, schools, or courthouses. At this time of coronavirus, the entire state should be considered a sensitive location.

Promote a Level of Appreciation for Essential Workers

This is a “teaching moment” in our state, where we can help remove the negative stigma attached to low-wage jobs. During this time of crisis, New Yorkers across the state are finding a newfound appreciation for delivery people, supermarket workers, taxi drivers, and the thousands of others who are suddenly recognized as essential. Some organized moments of appreciation have even been orchestrated, such as the widespread applause that echoed around [New York City at 7pm on March 27](#), when New Yorkers applauded, banged on pots, and yelled out “thank you!” and “you’re saving our lives!”

Just as first responders got a heightened level of recognition for their work after September 11, 2001, in the coronavirus response, now is the time to show our appreciation and respect for these workers and uplift them as they continue to do a great job caring for community members and providing services

despite the chances of them contracting the coronavirus. They deserve to be recognized for the outstanding job that they do on a daily basis, especially during times of crisis.

Recommendations

- Ensure that all, regardless of immigration status, are covered by Disaster Medicaid so that everyone can receive medical attention if exposed to COVID-19.
- Develop a state fund so that workers who are excluded from federal unemployment insurance can get unemployment benefits, regardless of immigration status, to help with lay-offs due to required business closures.
- Push for pay increases for essential workers who have to continue providing services while possibly exposing themselves to the coronavirus.
- Stop spreading fear throughout the undocumented community and stop the detainment of undocumented immigrants.
- Address safety concerns for essential workers by ensuring that they have the supplies they need to remain safe while providing for the community.
- Promote a level of appreciation for essential workers who put themselves at risk to continue to provide necessary services to local communities.

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¹ Pew Research Center, "U.S. unauthorized immigrant population estimates by state, 2016," available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/interactives/u-s-unauthorized-immigrants-by-state/>.