2020

Meeting the Moment

An Early Assessment of the Immigrant Worker Safety Net Fund during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON)—a federation of community-based worker centers and advocacy organizations—implemented a plan to urgently respond to the twin public health and unemployment crises that were rapidly unfolding. Making use of a national network of worker centers and their local organizational infrastructures, NDLON and its members quickly amassed and then administered cash and noncash aid, and provided emergency assistance to people who otherwise had been excluded from the federal government's pandemic-relief initiatives. NDLON's efforts constitute one of the primary civil-society responses to the exclusions faced by millions of immigrants who are not eligible for the \$2 trillion Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and its Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program which provides relief to unemployed workers, as well as many state and local government relief programs.

The centerpiece of NDLON's response to unmet community needs during the pandemic is the Immigrant Worker Safety Net Fund (IWSNF), which has been created to provide immediate cash, food, and subsistence aid to low-income immigrant workers and their families. Through the IWSNF, grants have been awarded to 55 community-based organizations across the country to enable them to administer emergency assistance. The fund initially prioritized aid to workers who are over the age of 60, those who have contracted the virus or have health conditions that render them especially vulnerable to COVID-19, and single mothers, though many other community members also have received assistance. In addition, to enhance the capacity of worker centers to respond to the unprecedented needs of immigrant communities, most NDLON affiliates have developed COVID-19 plans, which are being resourced through other newly raised funds.

As of July 2020, NDLON and its partners have raised more than \$4.5 million in aid that is being directed to immigrants and their families, as well as to the organizations providing assistance. To date, \$3.26 million has been allocated to the IWSNF and \$1.26 million has been earmarked to support the implementation of worker centers' COVID-19 plans. Cash assistance is being distributed in seven rounds of funding, with further rounds planned should additional resources be generated through ongoing fundraising.

This report provides an assessment of these early efforts. Between May and July 2020, survey responses were collected from the staff of 50 worker centers participating in the IWSNF to better understand: (a) the impacts the pandemic is having on low-income immigrant workers and their families; (b) the organizational challenges worker centers have encountered as they swiftly pivoted their focus from employment and workers' rights to the provision of emergency assistance; and (c) the capacity of worker centers to expand service delivery given that the pandemic will continue to ravage the US economy and local public health systems for a long time to come. The next section provides background on why the IWSNF is needed. This is followed by a brief description of the Fund. Analysis of data from the worker center survey comprises the remaining sections, including sections on how COVID-19 has impacted workers and their organizations as well as on worker center activities and capacities.

Background



THE PANDEMIC HAS EXACERBATED SOCIOECONOMIC DISPARITIES

The coronavirus pandemic has laid bare deep socioeconomic divides across the United States. Exposure to and mortality from COVID-19 are characterized by pronounced disparities between racial and ethnic groups, revealing how social determinants of health—including racism, xenophobia, poverty, and public policy—create heightened vulnerabilities for certain groups.

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Immigrants are over-represented in occupations and industries where risks of on-the-job exposure to COVID-19 are greatest.² Among low-wage immigrant workers, the high-risk occupations they hold include home health aides, janitors and cleaners, housekeepers, grocery workers, and food preparation workers. These jobs require workers to perform tasks in close proximity to one another or to come in contact with clients/customers, including those who have become infected. Furthermore, many low-wage immigrants have continued to report for work during the pandemic, either because the jobs they perform have been designated "essential" or because they simply cannot afford to miss work. That is to say, they are unable to observe state and local government stay-at-home directives issued to suppress the spread of the coronavirus.

Many immigrants, though, are out of work. With optimism that regional economies could swiftly "open back up" dashed as COVID-19 cases spiked in the very locales that have restarted business operations most quickly, the risk that countless families will be plunged deep into poverty has been exacerbated. Food and housing insecurity are rising sharply across the US, and hardships on lower-income families are steadily mounting.³ Policy decisions have been key contributing factors in whether or not certain families are eligible for federal relief. The CARES Act provided one-time cash payments of \$1,200 to individuals earning less than \$75,000, as long as they filed taxes in either 2018 or 2019. Here, too, unauthorized immigrants were largely excluded, as was anyone who filed taxes using an Individual Tax Identification Number (ITIN) or even whose family member filed using an ITIN.⁴ The Migration Policy Institute estimates that "due to the restriction in the CARES Act, 15.4 million people will be excluded from the stimulus payments: 9.9 million unauthorized immigrants, along with 3.7 million children and 1.7 million spouses who are either U.S. citizens or green-card holders."⁵



IMMIGRANTS FACE SYSTEMIC EXCLUSIONS FROM PANDEMIC-RELATED PUBLIC ASSISTANCE In addition, undocumented workers are entirely excluded from both the state-administered Unemployment Insurance (UI) system and Pandemic Unemployment Assistance. While the exclusion from the one-time cash payments provided by the CARES Act was particularly invidious, the ongoing exclusion of undocumented workers from UI is a far greater economic blow, as the UI system regularly provides ongoing payments for up to 26 weeks of unemployment, a length which was extended by 13 to 20 additional weeks through the CARES Act, and further supplemented with an additional \$600 per week (the latter provision expired at the end of July 2020).

To make matters worse for immigrant workers and their families, the difficulties they face are compounded by recent changes in federal immigration policy. On February 24, 2020, just weeks before the coronavirus pandemic struck the US, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) implemented a "Public Charge Rule" stating that individuals applying for US immigration status would be inadmissible if they are deemed "likely at any time to become a public charge." The public benefits considered by DHS include any federal, state, local, or tribal cash benefit programs for income maintenance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps), and Section 8 housing assistance. Individuals residing "inside or outside the U.S. who seek to either obtain Lawful Permanent Resident status (apply for immigrant visas and 'green cards') or to extend or change

nonimmigrant status (temporary visas) must now demonstrate that they have not received public benefits, or have received limited public benefits, with [few] exceptions."⁷

Discouraging immigrants from accessing assistance during the pandemic is not limited to the realm of public benefits, however. Fears of apprehension by immigration authorities are dissuading some unauthorized immigrants from receiving COVID-19 testing and treatment, placing themselves and the wider community at risk. This is another manifestation of the "attrition through enforcement" strategy promoted by anti-immigrant hardliners who seek to make residence in the US untenable by excluding unauthorized immigrants from public institutions and support systems. As a result of policies of exclusion and the fears they are intended to stoke, immigration policy is playing an outsize role in impeding immigrants' access to public and private resources that could help them cope with the pandemic.

State and local governments have largely failed to provide an alternative response to the needs of their immigrant communities. In places where governments have created programs to serve undocumented immigrants and their families, the amount allocated has been inadequate in proportion to the need, as well as in proportion to the significant societal and economic contributions made by undocumented workers. California, for example, created a fund of \$125 million, which includes \$50 million from philanthropy along with \$75 million from state coffers. However, the population of the undocumented totals more than 3 million, and the fund will only reach an estimated 150,000 people with a one-time payment of \$500. Connecticut responded to community pressure by creating a public/private fund of \$3.5 million for those ineligible for federal pandemic relief. Most of these funds (\$2.5 million) will be allocated for landlords whose undocumented immigrant tenants have been unable to pay rent, while \$1 million will be provided in direct aid. However, "with an estimated 120,000 undocumented immigrants in Connecticut, the \$1 million in direct aid is modest, just \$8.33 per person if it were to be distributed evenly."10 Other states, like Illinois, New Jersey, and New York still have not created any statewide funds for undocumented immigrants, although some cities, including Chicago and New York City, have done so.

The Immigrant Worker Safety Net Fund

With immigrants, and especially undocumented immigrants and their US-citizen and legal permanent resident family members, excluded from the federal government's relief measures, community organizations have partnered with the philanthropic sector to create initiatives to partially fill the void created by federal lawmakers.

One prominent example is the Immigrant Worker Safety Net Fund (IWSNF), which along with a grants program to support worker center capacity-building, has been established by NDLON. As of July 2020, these two funding pools totaled more than \$4.5 million, a testament to the importance of institutional and grassroots fundraising during a crisis. Philanthropic support totaling more than \$2.9 million has been provided by 30 national and local foundations and institutions, while individual donors and smaller funds have contributed more than \$1.6 million. Arguably, major foundations should be allocating even greater resources to the IWSNF and other community-driven funds. ¹¹ By providing emergency assistance to immigrant families that have been excluded from federal programs, the IWSNF is meeting urgent needs, while the resourcing of worker centers' COVID-19 plans is helping strengthen the operational infrastructure of worker organizations for greater impacts over the long run even as they assist in meeting the immediate needs of local communities.

The remainder of this report examines some of the ways in which the coronavirus pandemic has impacted worker center constituents and assesses key worker center activities and organizational capacities.

COVID-19 and immigrant workers

It has been widely reported that the COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted the health and wellbeing of African American and Latinx communities (as well as Indigenous Americans).¹² Several factors related to longstanding health and social



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inequities account for these disparate impacts, including that Black and Brown workers are greatly overrepresented in frontline occupations where there is heightened exposure to the coronavirus and that these workers and their family members often have inadequate access to medical care. Given these factors, it is unsurprising that the membership bases of day laborer worker centers have been severely impacted by the pandemic. In addition to widespread job losses and steep declines in earnings as local economies were shuttered, 82 percent of worker centers indicated that members have been diagnosed with or are showing symptoms of COVID-19. Thirty-eight percent of the worker centers also indicated that staff or volunteers have contracted the illness. Most alarming, 31 percent of worker centers report that members have died after contracting COVID-19.

Barriers to obtaining healthcare are compounding the difficulties faced by worker members (Chart 1 and Table 1). When asked about barriers that prevent workers from seeking medical care for COVID-19 illness, 70 percent of respondents reported workers lacked health insurance or could not afford care; 62 percent reported workers' lack of legal immigration status prevented them from seeking care; 62 percent reported fear or anxiety (likely related to concerns over immigration enforcement) prevented workers from seeking care; 48 percent identified language barriers to accessing care; and 46 percent reported that workers do not know where to seek care (likely because they lack insurance and cannot afford care).

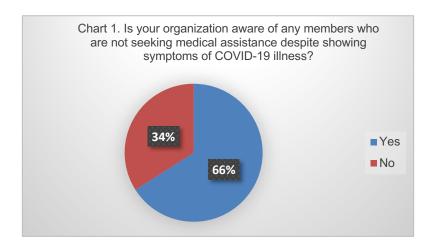
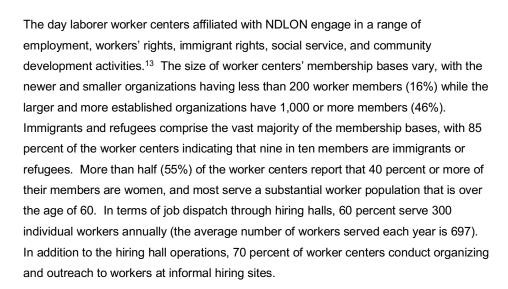


Table 1. Barriers to obtaining medical care for suspected COVID-19 illness

| | Cannot afford/No insurance | Unaware of where to go | Immigration status | Fear/Anxiety | Language | Lack of transportation or support |
|----------|----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------|----------|-----------------------------------|
| Yes | 70% | 44% | 62% | 62% | 48% | 46% |
| No | 14% | 40% | 22% | 26% | 36% | 38% |
| No | | | | | | |
| response | 16% | 16% | 16% | 12% | 16% | 16% |

Worker center activities and capacities



Each of the 50 worker centers surveyed are located in jurisdictions where a stay-at-home order is/was in effect. As the pandemic worsened, 60 percent of the worker centers ceased their hiring-hall operations that link workers and employers, effectively shutting down segments of the local day-labor market in order to contain the spread of the coronavirus. As states and localities begin to lift their stay-at-home orders in an effort to restart their flagging economies, two-thirds of worker centers are considering reopening their hiring halls, if local circumstances permit.



DAY LABORER WORKER CENTERS HAVE PIVOTED TO PROVIDE DIRECT ASSISTANCE TO IMMIGRANT WORKERS

Many worker centers have slowed their job placement activities and shifted their energies to providing emergency assistance to immigrant workers and their families.

While the worker centers suspended their job-placement activities, they did not shut down all operations, but rather shifted their immediate priorities to providing direct emergency assistance to workers and their families (Table 2), despite the risks to staff and volunteers.

Table 2. Worker Centers providing emergency assistance

| | | COVID19 Relief Cash Awards | Food pantry | Distributio n of PPE | Resources/Referrals to clinics | Apply for other cash assistance | Wage theft |
|----|----|----------------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------|
| Ye | es | 88% | 78% | 90% | 88% | 80% | 76% |
| No | 0 | 12% | 22% | 8% | 12% | 20% | 24% |

Emergency relief

Eighty-eight percent of worker centers are administering direct cash assistance to workers and their families through the IWSNF as a way to partially offset income losses due to the pandemic. Monthly cash awards range from \$50 per worker to \$250 to \$500 for a worker who has contracted COVID-19. Most awards are in the \$200-\$250 range per month. Cash assistance is helping immigrant families avoid eviction, cope with food insecurity, pay for basic necessities, and cover medical costs. Worker centers are supplementing their relief funds with a range of complementary services. These include operating an emergency food pantry (78%); providing meals (sometimes hundreds of meals each day at a given center) and delivering food to homes in cases where members are ill; providing funds for rent and mortgage payments while also offering eviction-prevention assistance; distributing personal care items, such as diapers, thermometers and soap; and conducting health screenings and making physical- and mental-health referrals to area clinics (88% are involved in making referrals to health professionals).

Furthermore, to assist immigrants in accessing other forms of emergency relief, 80 percent of worker centers are helping community members apply for aid, and many are directly distributing relief from other sources in addition to what is being provided through the IWSNF. For example, in California, at least ten NDLON-affiliated worker

centers are delivering cash assistance through the California Immigrant Resilience Fund, a public/private partnership that is providing pandemic-related support to undocumented immigrants.¹⁴ In this way, the community-based infrastructure developed by worker centers, and strengthened through the IWSNF, is enhancing the speed and efficacy of a range of relief efforts. Moreover, this infrastructure can be mobilized again should other crises impact immigrant communities in the future.

Employment assistance

In terms of fulfilling their more traditional roles in providing employment-related services, worker centers have responded to pandemic conditions by quickly developing or expanding "virtual hiring halls." With most employment-dispatch functions shuttered by the pandemic, and with employers and workers needing ways to safely arrange hiring, online platforms have replaced, for the time being at least, in-person hiring halls. As with conventional worker center employment dispatch, virtual hiring halls do not charge fees to workers or employers, and they help maintain minimum wages and workplace standards in a sector where the nonpayment of wages and other abuses are widespread. Because wage theft is so common, especially for day laborers securing work at informal hiring sites, 76 percent of worker centers are continuing to provide wage-recovery services. Workers in many parts of the country are reporting that wage theft is on the rise during the pandemic as unscrupulous or insolvent employers seek to take advantage of jobseekers who are especially eager to secure work given the generalized slowdown of the economy. To enhance public health, 90 percent of worker centers are providing workers with masks and PPE (some of which is being manufactured by the centers), thereby ensuring that immigrant workers have opportunities to secure the most basic forms of protection against the coronavirus.

Community education

Worker centers are conducting important worker and community education and outreach, with programs that often operate in tandem with emergency food, PPE, and cash distribution. For example, in the early weeks of the pandemic, Wind of the Spirit in Morristown, New Jersey, developed a trainers' brigade, which included day laborers who had previous emergency-response experience from Superstorm Sandy. These volunteers provided basic coronavirus awareness trainings at day-laborer hiring sites and paired their outreach with kits that included a handmade facemask, a bar of soap, and a pair of gloves. NDLON has developed popular education materials that are

being used in coronavirus awareness outreach by Wind of the Spirit and other worker centers.

Advocacy campaigns

In addition, many workers centers are participating in pandemic-related public policy campaigns, to pressure states and localities to establish funds to provide further support for undocumented workers and campaigns to provide greater health and safety protections for workers who are still employed. These campaigns serve multiple purposes in addition to their goals of additional funds for undocumented workers: (1) to raise ongoing public awareness on the continued devastation caused by exclusion of the undocumented population, which began long before coronavirus; (2) to organize immigrant workers and allies toward a clear understanding that these exclusions are caused by decisions by policymakers, who can be pressured, not an inevitable result of coronavirus; and (3) to maintain and build the strength and power of workers centers as a resource for their communities.

Strengthening worker center capacity



DAY LABORER WORKER CENTERS ARE POISED TO PROVIDE GREATER ASSISTANCE TO COMMUNITIES MOST IMPACTED BY THE PANDEMIC As the previous section confirms, in the early weeks and months of the pandemic, NDLON member organizations were able to rapidly reorient their activities to meet a range of worker and community needs. However, despite the large sums in cash and non-cash assistance that have been distributed, demand for resources far outstrips supply, and significant unmet needs remain. To increase the support that can be provided, NDLON and the worker centers in the network have continued fundraising for the IWSNF, and individual worker centers have taken important steps to building their capacity to meet this moment.

The staff of nearly every worker center (96%) indicated their organization is willing and able to distribute even greater amounts of cash and non-cash assistance (Chart 2 and Table 3). Direct cash awards are the preferred mode of delivery (70%) followed by

cash assistance through debit cards (56%), provision of PPE (56%), emergency food assistance (50%), and assistance via gift cards (48%). These figures suggest that, although at least half of the organizations could expand the labor-intensive delivery of PPE and food, should service provision be expanded, distribution of cash and cash-like assistance is the preferred mode of delivery.

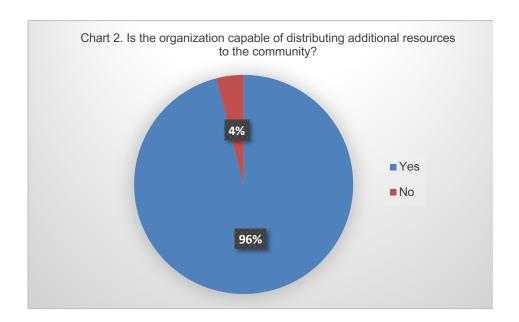
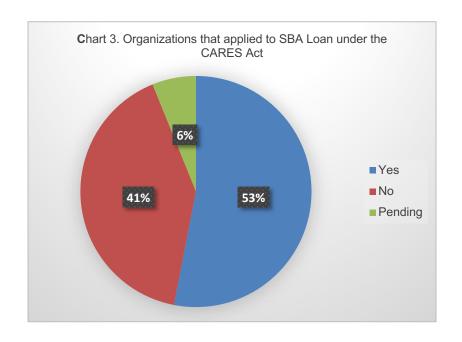
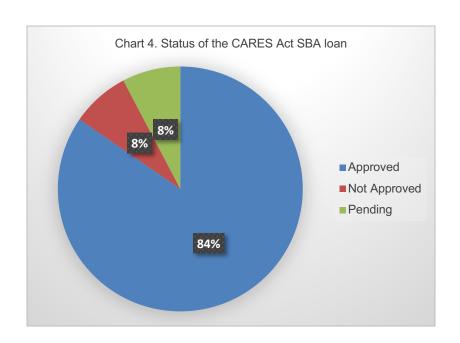


Table 3. Preferred means of distributing aid

| | Direct cash | Gift cards | Debit | Safety | Food |
|-----|-------------|------------|-------|---------------|------------|
| | awards | | card | equipment/PPE | assistance |
| Yes | 70% | 48% | 56% | 54% | 50% |
| No | 28% | 46% | 36% | 42% | 46% |
| NA | 2% | 4% | 4% | 2% | 4% |

In an effort to strengthen their capacity to assist community members during the pandemic, more than half (53%) of worker centers applied for Small Business Administration loans under the CARES Act Payroll Protection Program (Chart 3). Of the organizations applying for loans, 84 percent had their applications approved and two are still pending (Chart 4).





Two-thirds of worker centers (66%) have developed workplans to specifically respond to the pandemic and its impacts on immigrant employment and public health. Within these plans the most common priorities are: increasing staff (47%), expanding emergency cash assistance programs (41%), strengthening community organizing (38%), providing PPE (38%), food assistance (34%), expanding training programs (31%), and developing new programming (31%). Other priorities include making equipment purchases (22%), making facilities improvements (19%), and conducting research (9%).

Conclusion

NDLON's IWSNF has proven to be a crucial intervention during the coronavirus pandemic, assisting immigrant workers and families at a time when federal government has failed to support immigrant communities. With resource levels that are modest when compared to the scale of need, day laborer worker centers have provided vital assistance that has helped immigrants stave off hunger, eviction, and destitution. The demand for services can be overwhelming; organization staff report that as soon as word spreads that relief is available, worker centers are inundated with requests for assistance. NDLON and its member organizations are managing these demands by strengthening their development, communications, and operations functions, as well as by conducting outreach to new donors so that the Fund can grow in scope, scale, and impact.

As the pandemic continues, it is vital that the beneficiaries of the IWSNF—immigrant workers and families—receive additional contributions. To this end, NDLON has partnered with Casa Latina, the Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County, and Inclusive Action for the City to launch the Pa'lante! Fund. This ambitious initiative seeks to raise \$62.5 million to be disbursed over five years to organizations that provide support to immigrants and refugees, as well as day laborers, domestic workers, and other low-wage workers, regardless of their immigration status. In addition to the provision of emergency aid, the Pa'lante! Fund seeks to further empower undocumented migrants and low-wage workers impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, increase the capacities of immigrant-serving organizations, ensure the

continued provision of emergency services to immigrant communities, and strengthen collaboration with allied organizations around critical education and advocacy efforts to reform failed immigration policies and ensure workers have access to health care and emergency services. Launched in July 2020, the Pa'lante! Fund marks the next phase of the Immigrant Worker Safety Net Fund as community-based organizations continue to evolve and innovate in response to unprecedented need.

Endnotes

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Participating organizations

Pomona Economic Opportunity Center

Northern Manhattan Coalition for Immigrant Rights

Centreville Immigration Forum

Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County, Inc.

WeCount!

Trabajadores Unidos de Washington DC

United community Center of Westchester, Inc.

Centro Laboral de Graton

Casa Latina

American Friends Service Committee Immigrant Rights

Program

Fe y Justicia

Building One Community The Center for Immigrant

Opportunity

Latino Union of Chicago

Legal Aid Justice Center

El Centro Hispano

Adelante Alabama Worker Center

Wind of the Spirit, Immigrant Collective of Morris County

Unidad Latina en Accion NJ

Workplace Project

Centro Humanitario para los Trabajadores

Pasadena Community Job Center

Malibu Community Labor Organization

Voz Workers' Rights Education Project

Arriba Las Vegas Worker Center

El Sol

Esperanza Community Center FL

Don Bosco Workers Inc.

New Immigrant Community Empowerment (NICE)

Catholic Charities de Yonkers

The Latin American Coalition

SALVA (Antelope Valley, CA)

Familias Unidas en Acción, New Orleans

Women Working Together USA (South Florida)

Day Worker Center of Mountain View

National TPS Alliance

Monument Impact Worker Center

Freeport, Justice Workers Center.

SF Day Labor Center - Dolores Street Community Service

COPAL (Minnesota)

La Colmena

CARECEN-LA

Neighbors Link Mount Kisko

Tonatierra Macehualli

Workers Defense Project

Unidad Latina en Accion Connecticut

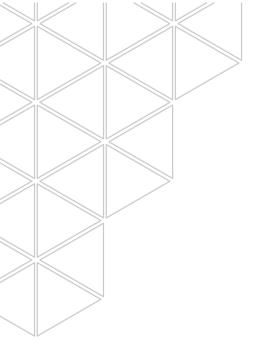
Community Resource Center of Mamaroneck

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New Labor

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