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# Under Threat & Left Out: NYC's Immigrants and the Coronavirus Crisis

Immigrant New Yorkers are enduring unprecedented economic pain from the pandemic—and yet they have been almost completely shut out of government programs created for those in need, CUF research and interviews with two dozen nonprofit leaders reveals.

by Sarah Amandolare, Laird Gallagher, Jonathan Bowles, and Eli Dvorkin

Immigrants have been essential to New York City's economic resurgence over the past four decades. They accounted for 107 percent the city's population growth between 1980 and 2018, founded more than half of all small businesses in the city,[1] and helped spark dramatic turnarounds in numerous neighborhoods that had emptied out in the 1970s. More recently, immigrant New Yorkers have played an indispensable role on the front lines of the COVID-19 crisis, comprising more than half of the city's essential workers.

Now New York's immigrants are the ones in need of help—but the government response so far has largely left them behind.

Interviews with nearly two dozen leaders of nonprofits that work closely with immigrants across the five boroughs reveal that immigrant New Yorkers are confronting unprecedented economic pain from the pandemic—and yet they have been almost completely shut out of government stimulus programs created for those in need.

Nine of the organizations we spoke with say that at least 75 percent of their immigrant clients have lost jobs because of the pandemic. For instance, 90 percent of immigrants served by the Harlem-based African Services Committee have lost their primary source of income, while 95 percent of the day laborers and fully 100 percent of the domestic workers and nail salon workers supported by Staten Island–based La Colmena are now out of work.

This devastating loss of income has led to widespread food insecurity among immigrant populations across the five boroughs. Multiple organizations report that as much as 75 percent of their clients are going hungry. For example, 65 percent of African Service Committee clients have experienced food insecurity, while 40 percent of Ridgewood-based POMOC's Polish-speaking clients say they do not have enough food for themselves or their children.

"Virtually the entire population we serve is jobless and facing food insecurity," says Annetta Seecharran, executive director of Queens-based Chhaya CDC, which provides services for South Asian and Indo-Caribbean communities.

Yet despite the mass scale unemployment hitting the city's immigrants, they have been almost entirely shut out of federal cash relief. Several of the nonprofit organizations we interviewed for this report told us that 95 to 100 percent of their immigrant clients have not received or are ineligible for the IRS stimulus check. "So far, of the 108 clients my team has spoken to over the past four weeks, 0 percent have received or expect to receive the $1,200 cash assistance," says Ravi Ragbir, executive director of New Sanctuary Coalition. Gonzalo Mercado, a board member of La Colmena and New York coordinator of the National Day Labor Organizing Network, adds, "About 99.9 percent of the community La Colmena works with is not eligible for the federal stimulus check, even though they have American-born children."

Current city and state relief efforts directed at New York's immigrants, while well-intentioned, are dwarfed by the monumental needs of the estimated 192,000 undocumented workers in New York City who have lost their jobs—an alarming figure that our research suggests may be just a fraction of the total.[2]

In the meantime, nearly every organization we reached is trying to distribute food and financial relief to immigrant clients or connect clients to food pantries. "On food distribution days, about 300 or 400 people come. In an hour, the food's gone," says Yesenia Mata, executive director of La Colmena.

Among our key findings on the sheer extent of income loss:

- "All" of the 1,500 to 2,000 Nepali-speaking nail salon workers served by Adhikaar have lost their jobs "without any certainty whether they would get their jobs back."
- 80 percent of the businesses working with the Business Center for New Americans have closed due to the pandemic. (It remain unclear whether some of these businesses will be able to come back during subsequent phases of reopening.)
- 90 percent of the people served by South Bronx–based Masa have lost their primary source of income and are experiencing food insecurity.
- 90 percent of community members served by an organization supporting Brooklyn's Arab community no longer have jobs.
- 76 percent of Chinese Progressive Association clients—including those who work in restaurants, and nail and beauty salons—are not working at all.
- 75 percent out of the 450 clients of Mercy Center's Immigrant Services program in the Bronx have lost their primary source of income.
- In one Chinese American Planning Council preschool class of 24 children, "20 out of 24 families lost their jobs in March."

Job loss, business closures, and food insecurity are bearing down on immigrant communities, creating untenable pressure inside households that are often crowded with more than one family and facing pressures to keep up with rent payments, utility bills, and basic needs. At the same time, parents who lack English language skills and the technology needed for remote learning are struggling to find the time and space to help their children complete assignments. And many immigrant students are tasked with caring for younger siblings or relatives while their parents go to work on the front lines of the

pandemic.

It comes as little surprise that many organizations we interviewed expressed concern for their clients' mental health. Though some organizations offer counseling and other services, waitlists are building up quickly and both providers and clients have struggled to transition to telehealth-only models—especially for clients with limited or no access to broadband and devices. Preventive health services have become even more difficult for immigrants to access, leaving their communities in a cycle of vulnerability to COVID-19. The eviction moratorium is scheduled to end in August, and financially strapped tenants will be expected to pay back-rent. And as the city reopens, organizations fear exhausted frontline immigrant workers will be at greatest risk amid a second wave of infections, and anti-Asian discrimination could spike again.

This report —a partnership between the Center for an Urban Future and New York Immigration Coalition—documents the financial and material hardship, barriers to relief, and new challenges facing New York's immigrant communities. The report, which is based on interviews with leaders of more than twenty immigrant-serving organizations across the five boroughs, also provides specific recommendations as to what city and state policymakers should do right now.

**The vast majority of immigrants served by the community-based organizations we spoke to have lost their primary source of income and are seeking food aid and financial relief.**

- 95 percent of NMIC clients (78 of 82 people) experiencing food insecurity due to COVID-19 are immigrants. (NMIC provides legal, social, and education/career services in northern Manhattan and the Bronx.)
- "Of the undocumented groups, 100 percent are really struggling with having lost their primary source of income. They are experiencing food insecurity," says a source at a labor organization representing retail workers.
- 60 to 70 percent of the clients of POMOC, an organization that works with the Polish community in Ridgewood, have lost their primary source of income.
- 65 percent of Libertas Center for Human Rights clients have lost their primary source of income, and 25 percent are experiencing food insecurity. "[Food] is difficult to find despite the city and state providing resources. Some of our clients have been deemed ineligible for services without rationale and many are afraid to leave their apartments to pick up food and cannot afford delivery," the organization reports.
- 60 to 70 percent of the 400 domestic workers recently contacted by Adhikaar are not being paid and are unsure if or when they will be called back to work. 20 to 25 percent have continued to work, often moving in with employees with little to no time off. The remaining 5 to 10 percent were laid off within two weeks of the start of the pandemic.
- "48 percent of the immigrant clients I was directly in touch with in April requested help with one or more household bills they were unable to pay," says one African Services Committee staff member.
- "Over 50 percent if not closer to 75 percent (if not higher)" of Catholic Charities of New York's immigrant clients have lost their primary source of income. Most of the organization's South Bronx clients are domestic, construction, or restaurant workers, Uber/Lyft drivers, or vendors. "The remaining percentage either has never had a primary source of income or are essential workers," the organization reports. Approximately 50 to 75 percent are experiencing food insecurity.
- "50 percent of community members have reported that they have lost their income or jobs," according to the Chinese American Planning Council. "In one preschool class of 24 children, 20 out of 24 families lost their jobs in March," the organization says. In addition, youth who are helping care for younger siblings while their parents go to work "are experiencing anxiety about food as they do not know how to cook and may not have enough to eat at home. Some youth have even resorted to rationing their daily food intake to ensure their food does not run out."
- 80 percent of the clients of the Business Center for New Americans have closed their businesses. "About 40 percent were, within 2 to 3 weeks of no income, experiencing food insecurity. One client was eating one meal a day in an effort to make his money last. In one case, the parents were both ill, had two children to care for, and hardly any money left," the organization reports.

- 14 clients of one Brooklyn Defender Services (BDS) social worker (around 40 percent of her caseload) have lost their jobs due to COVID-19, and most were working in the restaurant and service industry. Another BDS social worker estimates 90 percent of her clients are experiencing food insecurity.

**Most immigrants either do not qualify for government assistance or are struggling to access benefits even if they would qualify.** Many immigrants are also scared to seek government assistance, particularly SNAP, because of Trump administration changes to the "public charge" rule that can result in applications for residency or entry being rejected if someone is deemed likely to rely on federal government support. While the shifts directly target a relatively small subset of immigrant New Yorkers, the changes have had a chilling effect on those seeking access to benefits in immigrant communities.

- "About 99.9 percent of the community La Colmena works with is not eligible for the federal stimulus check even though they have American-born children," says Gonzalo Mercado, a board member of La Colmena and New York coordinator of the National Day Labor Organizing Network.
- "One person out of 108 [clients we've spoken to over the past four weeks] was able to receive unemployment insurance," says Ravi Ragbir of New Sanctuary Coalition.
- 93 percent of the people served by Bronx-based Masa will not be receiving stimulus checks.
- Only 35 percent of Chinese Progressive Association clients have received or expect to receive the $1,200 cash assistance. Only 20 percent of clients have received unemployment insurance. "Some who are authorized to work, eligible for unemployment insurance, and file taxes are not eligible for the $1,200 cash assistance because they are filing taxes jointly with an undocumented spouse," says executive director Mae Lee.
- Fewer than 20 percent of Catholic Charities' immigrant clients have received or expect to receive a government stimulus check. About half of clients who are eligible for unemployment insurance have managed to receive it (about 25 percent of clients may be eligible). Multiple barriers are at play, according to Mario Russell, director of immigration and refugee services, including fear "both of public charge and of potentially being 'outed' to government officials as undocumented" by seeking benefits; as well as "lack of information about government programs [and] not knowing how to navigate access to benefits."
- When Chhaya CDC distributed $50,000 in grant funding to 100 individuals, "within 24 hours of getting the word out, not publicly but just to our channel, we got nearly 600 applicants who say they didn't qualify for the stimulus, or any other assistance," says executive director Annetta Seecharran. "Regarding cash assistance, many people say, 'No thank you; I'd rather starve then put myself at risk of the government getting my information.'"
- "A lot of our undocumented families are unable to get unemployment insurance or any type of stimulus bill payments," says Mon Yuck Yu of the Academy of Medical & Public Health Services (AMPHS), a Brooklyn-based nonprofit focused on making healthcare more accessible to immigrant New Yorkers. "That translates to some people putting their lives on the line to go out to work, probably for cash payments that would be lower than normal, because now they're in many ways desperate for the job."
- "We talk to the workers weekly, and they keep telling us that every day they see more people coming to the corner," says Gonzalo Mercado of La Colmena. "When they lose their job, none of our community qualify for unemployment, so they go back to the corner. That is the only safety net they have if they lose work."
- "This is a nightmare. About 20 to 25 percent are filing the claims and received some kind of reimbursement. The majority of our clients are the self-employed that are filing for the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) and we have not yet had one positive. And people started filing in late March. That's a huge problem and a source of a lot of distress for our community," says Eva Kornacka, executive director of POMOC.
- "With so many [physical offices] closed, [SNAP recipients] are having trouble renewing applications. Another barrier is fear of the government due to this administration's constant attacks on immigrants, including people not accessing SNAP because of fear of public charge, which SNAP doesn't apply [to] but people are still fearful," say La Colmena sources.

- “Very few of our clients are eligible for the stimulus package,” reports the Libertas Center for Human Rights. “The few that are have not yet received their $1,200. Based on conversations with Libertas clients, their largest barrier to seeking resources is fear; fear of both the virus itself as well as fear for their immigration status being affected.”
- Fewer than 10 percent of immigrants served by the African Services Committee have been able to receive unemployment insurance, mostly due to lack of documentation and information. According to program staff, “A lot of the clients who are Uber drivers did not know that they could apply for unemployment.” Out of the 20 percent who are eligible for stimulus checks, 7 percent had received payment as of May 15.
- “Many of our community members do not qualify for unemployment insurance or federal CARES Act support either because they are undocumented, they don't have a social security number (ITIN holders), or because they work informal/cash/gig jobs,” reports the Chinese American Planning Council. “For gig and informal workers, even the ones that do qualify are receiving low or minimum benefits. Language access represents a significant issue, especially when it comes to learning about and navigating new and changing government programs. Lastly, public charge concerns are a barrier to participating in SNAP and Medicaid, and causing fears around unemployment insurance and PUA.”
- NMIC has helped 162 people file for unemployment insurance since the pandemic began, at least 97 of whom are immigrants.
- Just 20 percent of the immigrants served by Asian Americans for Equality (AAFE) have received the stimulus check and other emergency resources, primarily New York State emergency Medicaid and SNAP. Only about 5 percent have received unemployment insurance during the three weeks in which AAFE has been providing application assistance. In addition, community members are afraid of seeking government support or using benefits due to public charge. They are also afraid of being scammed.
- Business Center for New Americans does not know yet how many clients have managed to receive the federal stimulus check, “but the ones who are desperate—and we are giving them grants—have not received their funds. One reason is that they did not file their taxes electronically.” The organization set aside $50,000 from its own budget and is trying to raise an additional $50,000 “to make grants of $500 to $1,000 until stimulus checks arrive. So far we have helped 23 individuals and think there are about 150 among our clients who need this help.”
- “One impact of the public charge rule is that people who legally have the right to public assistance, have disenrolled,” says Jo-Ann Yoo of the Asian American Federation.

**Limited language and technology access are presenting major barriers to accessing benefits.** Though immigrants may be eligible for some city and state benefits, their access to unemployment or local assistance is often hampered by low digital literacy, the lack of a computer or high-speed internet at home, and limited English proficiency.

- “You're talking about extremely marginalized people who may or may not have literacy, who may or may not have access to a computer,” says Annetta Seecharran of Chhaya CDC. “They might have access to a phone, but they don't have access to computers. How do you complete the unemployment application when you don't have access to a computer, and you're being forced to social distance?”
- “There's a lot of information being pushed out, but in the Chinese language, it's very uneven. Sometimes you have a translation and sometimes you don't,” says Mae Lee of the Chinese Progressive Association. “This places a greater burden on community organizations to help clients navigate. Immigrants are not accessing [benefits] because they think they aren't eligible, and still need assistance to access the benefits they are eligible for.”
- According to the African Services Committee, “Many of our clients find automated phone lines, ostensibly simple web forms, and other common technology steps to access services confusing, due to language barriers or unfamiliarity. At this time of high anxiety, stress and fear, they sometimes become even more overwhelmed with those feelings of helplessness, and it can be harder to talk someone through those processes by phone than in person.”
- Immigrants clients of Catholic Charities of New York have faced barriers accessing benefits, including “lack of access to technology or skills to access technology (so they can’t apply online)” and “language access; for example, if you

cannot apply online for unemployment insurance, you have to call, but then face a language barrier."

- "Low digital literacy" has prevented many community members served by Asian Americans for Equality from accessing government benefits or local assistance.

**Immigrant tenants are already facing threats of eviction, and organizations fear a crisis when the eviction moratorium ends, and back-rent comes due—currently slated for August 20.** Several organizations report that eviction threats are bearing down especially hard on those who rent single beds or rooms, or any variety of "illegal" housing such as attics and basements. Others report that clients have been illegally evicted for having COVID-19. And while any eviction must be processed through a formal housing court, "our community is deadly afraid of going to court, and so they will much rather leave" if threatened rather than get involved in any legal proceedings in a court of law, says Aracelis Lucero, executive director of Masa.

- AAFE tenant organizers "have reported a steady volume of calls from immigrants who have been illegally evicted, because either they or someone in their household was COVID positive. [Organizers] have also had to organize tenants to fight for heat and hot water. There has been an increase in Asian homelessness in Chinatown and especially Flushing, where immigrants have been evicted from renting single beds and rooms in overcrowded housing."
- 20 to 30 percent of POMOC clients are being threatened with eviction.
- 90 percent of the clients of an organization that advocates for the Arab community in Brooklyn have been threatened with eviction.
- "There wasn't anything concrete written out [in the eviction moratorium] regarding people who rent rooms. And that is very common in our community, so those are the people that we're trying to get emergency cash support to so they are not forced out of their rented rooms," says Aracelis Lucero of Masa.
- "Housing insecurity presents a significant issue," according to the Chinese American Planning Council. "Many community members live multiple families in an apartment, in informal housing situations, basement housing, and shift housing (rotating through an apartment in shifts), where community members are unable to social distance, fear transmission of the virus, and fear a precarious housing situation if they are unable to pay rent."

**Organizations report a lag in communication from city and state government officials to immigrant communities.** Many immigrants are struggling to get up-to-date and accurate information in their native languages about their rights during the pandemic, leading to widespread fear and misinformation. There are also gaps in access to the latest health and safety guidance. Ethnic media sources like foreign-language newspapers—a key source of information for immigrant communities, especially for older immigrants—have slowed or suspended their output during the crisis, straining communication further.

- "I've heard horrible stories of people being sick and not going to the hospital. People are afraid to go to the ER, and we're finding that a lot of people are not aware that they can't be turned away," says Annetta Seecharran of Chhaya CDC.
- New Sanctuary Coalition has a team monitoring the federal Executive Office for Immigration Review's pandemic-related schedule changes to court hearings for non-detained individuals. "But the [clients] don't even get a new notice, which violates legal premise," says Ravi Ragbir. Some clients, unaware of schedule changes, have continued putting their health at risk to travel to court for previously scheduled hearings.
- "It's devastating what's happening there," says an advocate for the Arab community in Brooklyn. "Near Atlantic Avenue and Court Street, it's a hard hit area with the virus. There is no outreach, no communication for our community. I didn't see any signage on the storefronts." Younger residents may be accessing health and safety information online and through social media. "They might educate the family, but what about the older generation, a husband and wife, living alone?" Many people in the community were also unaware of free hotel quarantine options that could prevent spreading within families, says the advocate, who asked the Arab American liaison at NYU Langone to help get the word out to people who sought hospital treatment.

- Online “misinformation” has led to POMOC clients not seeking the assistance they might qualify for, according to Executive Director Eva Kornacka. “For a lot of people, it’s a lack of information. People are terrified of public charge. We actively inform people on Facebook, but it’s still a huge, huge fear.” The pandemic has also dampened local media output, as well as strained her ability to connect with Polish community news sources. “Ethnic media is a key factor here,” says Kornacka. “When it comes from them, the community listens.”
- Getting reliable information about COVID-19 is especially challenging for older immigrants. Older adults served by the Chinese American Planning Council are “are dependent on Chinese media outlets like radio station AM 1480 and SinoVision on TV for their news updates, as well as on announcements relayed through friends or family members. But the most up-to-date information tends to become available in English media first, and our seniors struggle to understand local news stories without the help of a translator.”
- “Language access, even for a language as common as Spanish, is severely lacking in the public systems, especially the shelter system, public benefits systems such as HRA, and the food distribution systems. It is a little better in the healthcare system,” says Ravi Ragbir of New Sanctuary.
- “Queens has over 100 spoken languages that are not reflected in the dissemination of information. We are often scrambling for information translated to as many languages as possible that we can share with our population. Ethnic media is often playing catchup with COVID-19 news,” reports Queens Community House.

**Immigrant families face multiple unique barriers to successful at-home learning.** For parents lacking English language literacy, providing educational oversight is especially challenging. Insufficient access to tech and/or high-speed internet has prevented students from keeping up with their assignments. And overcrowding in already cramped apartments has made it a struggle for many families to create productive learning environments.

- “Schools have reached out to the parents to say that their children were not completing their homework assignments or weren’t coming to school. That's a function of the parents' current inability to be able to balance all of these full-time positions as teacher, caretaker, and breadwinner at once,” says Mon Yuck Yu of AMPHS.
- “Whether it's an English language barrier or a literacy barrier or just a basic stress barrier, it's very difficult to sit down and help your kids figure out the math packet. Even if the family has managed to get their hands on a digital device along with Internet access via the Department of Education (DOE), that's only the beginning of their challenges. Because now they're like, ‘How do you figure this out? How do you navigate this?’ How do you read when you don't have basic English skills?” says Annetta Seecharran of Chhaya CDC.
- A BDS social worker reported that one client’s children were sent tablets by the Department of Education, but the tablets do not have the appropriate applications downloaded, so the children are using their mother’s phone to complete the schoolwork. Another BDS social worker reported that two out of her five clients with children says that despite filling out request forms, they’ve not received tablets or laptops from the DOE. Another client, an undocumented Spanish-speaking woman, whose partner is in ICE detention, has three children who have been using her cellphone to do homework; the woman is likely hesitant to contact the DOE, according to BDS: “People who are undocumented are worried about reaching out to any authorities because they don't exactly understand who they can trust.”
- A labor union representing immigrant workers reported that families went without computers for too long when schools closed. “The city was giving out tablets. We tried as best as we could to connect folks to that. But that still means weeks went by with kids not having access to the technology they needed [or] access to the instruction.”
- Queens Community House says, “We have parents who are dropping out of ESOL classes because they also have to help their kids with remote schooling. Some of our students are accessing [virtual] classes through their phones because their children are using the only computer they have. Those who do have access to tech have to deal with another barrier: WiFi.”
- Catholic Charities reports that immigrant children and their parents need more support with homeschooling. There's a “serious lack of tech across populations—no laptops, one cell phone per household, limited data plans as well as lack

of wireless access," says Mario Russell. Additionally, parents who lack English language skills "are unable to provide home-based support for educational oversight and needs of their children."

- "Children of immigrant parents are definitely being left behind," says Aracelis Lucero of Masa. "If you live in a tight two-bedroom apartment and there's three families living in the same apartment, which is very common amongst our community members, where are your kids doing their school work? You already have a lot of students and families starting out at a disadvantage, especially certain immigrant communities who have low digital and overall literacy skills coupled with lower incomes."
- "Many immigrant families in New York City share apartments to save on rent. With most people in their family now staying at home, youth have felt that their living space is even noisier and more crowded than usual," reports the Chinese American Planning Council. "They are unable to be productive in this kind of environment and do not have adequate personal space to study or move around in. Youth whose parents are still leaving the house for work must often take care of younger siblings at home, a responsibility they find stressful and exhausting."
- More than 50 Asian and Latinx immigrant high school students enrolled in AAFE's after-school programs in Flushing are struggling with remote learning. "Some have had to wait for weeks before receiving a laptop, others do not have Internet access, and most are reporting feeling overwhelmed by the volume of assignments and the lack of support from teachers. Students are also feeling the stress of economic hardship in their household, bearing the responsibility of helping their parents apply for unemployment insurance benefits. We have also received one report of abuse, and we have not been able to stay in touch with the student, whose phone communication is controlled by the student's parents," the organization reports.

**Immigrant communities have been hit especially hard by the COVID-19 itself, and other healthcare challenges, including mental health concerns and a lack of access to preventive healthcare, are growing.** Apartment overcrowding, prevalent in many immigrant communities, leads to increased risk of coronavirus transmission and can add to the mental and physical toll of sheltering in place. Several organizations mentioned that immigrant clients are struggling to access testing and in some cases treatment for COVID-19. And new barriers are emerging as the crisis continues. "People with medical needs unrelated to COVID-19 are having a really difficult time getting any care. This challenge is exacerbated for clients who are ineligible for Medicaid, and who rely on free clinics and the NYC Care program," says Mon Yuck Yu of AMPHS.

- "A lot of [health] organizations and clinics that people used to fall back on are no longer offering the in-person, clinical services that are needed, so the issue becomes cyclical," says Mon Yuck Yu. "Healthcare needs that are our undocumented communities are facing are not being addressed. If we don't have healthy communities, if we don't prevent disease from happening, that creates greater risk factors for COVID itself. A lot of our families have been going to [community health centers] or hospitals for primary care, but for a good majority of them, access to these services has been cut off."
- AMPHS also reports immigrant clients experiencing barriers to coronavirus testing and treatment. "We've had clients who have had severe COVID-19 symptoms and were denied testing and treatment early on before testing became more widely available. Several other clients with acute symptoms have been unable to access testing. One Brooklyn-based client who was approved for a test had to use a car service in order to get to the drive-through tests in Staten Island. And I've heard this actually happened a few times: people who are trying to go get tests don't have the money for car service and cannot use public transportation due to their condition," says Mon Yuck Yu.
- Many people represented by Brooklyn Defender Services do not have identification, another barrier to accessing healthcare, especially for "people who have just recently been released from jails, either from criminal jails or particularly immigration detention centers. Many healthcare providers won't accept people who don't have any identification," the organization says.
- Mental health needs have skyrocketed during the pandemic, and immigrant-serving organizations worry these needs far exceed capacity. "AMPHS has been offering free mental health therapy services in Spanish and English for many of our existing and new client base," says Mon Yuck Yu. "But there aren't a lot of organizations offering this and for

those that are, they already have a very long waiting list, just like we do."

- "Many of our clients have become increasingly in need of mental health support, including emergency mental health care," confirms the Libertas Center for Human Rights. "Our capacity and that of our normal referral sources to provide these services has been stretched to our limits during this crisis."

With each passing week, the number and scale of challenges facing New York's immigrants are mounting, and organizations urge government to act quickly and decisively. "We have to take care of people's basic needs so they can be freed up to think and imagine a future, because they're essential. Essential. And the word essential means so much more now, but they're critical, to our cities and to all of us being able to move on and get past this," says Annetta Seecharran of Chhaya CDC.

**What city and state government can do to support immigrant New Yorkers**

**Create an emergency cash assistance fund for immigrants and immigrant-owned small businesses.** Immigrant-serving organizations report that clients—including workers and business owners—have been largely unable to access government relief and face mounting emergency cash needs. The city and state should act quickly to shore up the finances of immigrant-owned small businesses left out of the PPP program and other relief efforts and expand direct cash assistance to support immigrant workers unable to access unemployment insurance. "We need to very quickly figure out how to make sure assistance is available for every New Yorker regardless of [immigration] status," says Annetta Seecharran of Chhaya CDC.

New Sanctuary Coalition argues that the city should create a new fund to provide unemployment assistance for anyone who does not qualify for state unemployment due to immigration status. This fund could also support community-based organizations in ramping up screenings for benefits eligibility, for example, and to mediate between immigrants and social service providers that are monolingual or lack cultural competency. A social worker for Brooklyn Defender Services echoes this recommendation: "We need an excluded workers' fund to provide urgent immediate financial relief to undocumented workers."

**Increase investment in preventive health services in immigrant communities, in particular through community-based organizations and smaller clinics, as well as telehealth platforms.** Immigrant communities have been hardest hit by the health effects of the crisis, suffering a disproportionate share of all deaths in the city. But front-line practitioners report that many immigrants have struggled to access healthcare or remain concerned that their immigration status will affect access to preventive care and treatment—including the mental health needs of communities that are experiencing profound losses. "Many of our community members have expressed fear of going to hospitals," says Mon Yuck Yu of AMHPS. "How can we ensure that families are receiving devices and equipment at home so that they're able to screen for certain things themselves, and then go to clinics and hospitals only when they really need to?"

The city and state should ensure that immigrant New Yorkers are able to effectively access care for COVID-19 and fund immigrant-serving and immigrant-led CBOs to educate communities on health access and coverage, while expanding programs to offer mental health services. This also includes making sure COVID-19 testing is accessible in all communities "because it's not just testing for those who are potentially sick but testing for those who need to go back to work," says Pabitra Benjamin, executive director of Adhikaar. "And it's not just about testing. If there's ever a vaccine, testing is an easy system to replicate for vaccine distribution."

In addition, language barriers have proven challenging for immigrant-serving organizations seeking to connect clients with healthcare and relief programs. The city should expand support for organizations that offer interpretation services for languages beyond those officially supported by the city. "We have quite a few clients who speak indigenous languages which

are not among the city's official languages, and it's actually hard for us to even find interpreters. Especially when you're getting medical care, it's really essential that you understand what the advice is," says a source at Brooklyn Defender Services.

**Support critical immigrant-serving nonprofit agencies on the front lines of the pandemic response.** New York City's immigrant-led and -serving nonprofits have been put to the test by the crisis, rapidly deploying resources to affected communities across all five boroughs while incurring major new costs. To ensure that these organizations themselves can survive the crisis, the city should ensure that all agencies commit to paying budgeted contract levels through FY 2021, maintain the new level of flexibility afforded to organizations in developing a rapid response, and create an emergency fund to close the budget gaps caused by new costs and reduced revenues. In addition, the city should work closely with community-based organizations to help develop a longer-term recovery strategy. "We are in a great position to have members of the community tell the city directly what resources organizations will need in an emergency, and also to develop the longer-term strategy, says Gonzalo Mercado-Cisterna of La Colmena and the National Day Laborer Organizing Network.

**Sustain funding for New York's immigration legal services.** Even amid a global pandemic, the Trump Administration's aggressive detention and deportation activities continue, sowing fear in immigrant communities and increasing the risk of exposure to COVID-19 for New Yorkers who end up in detention. To help protect immigrants in this climate, New York City will need to maintain funding for its immigration legal services, including the $58.2 million allocated last year. The city should also consider creating a Community Legal Interpreter Bank, which would increase the supply of trained, vetted immigration legal interpreters to be provided to community-based nonprofit organizations.

**Establish a commercial rent-relief program that works for small business tenants as well as local landlords.** Immigrant-serving organizations report that the greatest threat facing small businesses is the inability to pay the rent. Meanwhile, small, local landlords are worried that tenants' inability to pay rent—combined with the end of mortgage relief after 90 days—will cause them to lose their buildings. "People are also worried about small landlords where rent is their livelihood. There's got to be solutions for people on rent and mortgages for the small landlord," says Pabitra Benjamin of Adhikaar. "People who are renting are really afraid for the end of the moratorium and those who are renting and not on a lease are already being kicked out of homes."

**Support investments in skills-building programs that expand economic opportunities for immigrant workers.** As the city begins planning for the economic recovery, policymakers should prioritize funding for programs that support the long-term economic prospects of immigrant workers. In particular, the city should restore and baseline $12 million in funding for adult literacy programs, which are essential for helping immigrant workers navigate government systems, access healthcare and other benefits, participate in workforce training programs, and support their children in the transition to remote learning.

**Take steps to prevent anti-Asian racism, especially as the city begins to reopen.** Fueled by xenophobic messaging from the Trump administration in the earliest days of the crisis, New York's diverse Asian communities report experiencing alarming levels of racism and vitriol, with consequences for both personal well-being and safety, as well as the ability of those communities to recover economically. "A lot of Asian families are still going to have a high level anxiety and have more propensity to stay at home, not just because of the fear of the coronavirus, but also the fear or the xenophobia and racism that they'll be experiencing what they go out," says Mon Yuck Yu of AMPHS.

The city and state should ensure consistent messaging and outreach to combat xenophobia and racism, protect immigrant workers, and promote immigrant-owned businesses, while ensuring that victims of hate crimes can access the New York

State Hate Crimes Task Force in multiple languages.

**Protect immigrant workers who are on the frontlines of the pandemic.** Immigrant New Yorkers comprise a disproportionate share of the essential workforce—from grocery store workers to home health aides—and many still fear that they will be exposed to the virus just by staying on the job. To support these essential workers, the city should ensure that workers have access to benefits like sick leave and childcare, as well as personal protective equipment, and that employers have the knowledge and resources needed to ensure social distancing guidelines and create safer workplaces.

A labor organization representing immigrant workers says that it "has had to negotiate with employers to install plexiglass and apply social distancing at the workplace. The costs can be prohibitive and before this pandemic, some essential businesses already operated on relatively thin margins." The city can help solve these challenges by focusing on the conditions facing immigrant workers. "I don't think people are thinking about what the world of work looks like for immigrants," says the organization's leader. "They're not going to get a vacation. They're not going to get time off. They're going to have to keep working."

Notes

1. Between 1980 and 2018, the foreign born population increased by 1,422,887 whereas the overall population in New York City increased by just 1,327,109, according to CUF's analysis of Census data.

2. James A. Parrott and Lina Moe. "The New Strain of Inequality: The Economic Impact of Covid-19 in New York City." Center for New York City Affairs, April 2020.

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