



**The Impact of Natural Disasters on  
Immigrants and Refugees in the United States:  
What Funders Need to Know in the Immediate Term**  
*September 25, 2017*

## **BACKGROUND**

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It is still early in the historic 2017 hurricane season, but Hurricanes Harvey and Irma have already devastated parts of Texas and most of Florida, as well as impacted Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina. As of this writing, Hurricane Maria has wreaked havoc in the Caribbean, disrupting life on Puerto Rico and other islands. Still other storms may make themselves felt before the season ends.

This brief provides analysis and recommendations that apply to any states that have experienced a natural disaster. However, it focuses on Texas and Florida, both of which have large foreign-born populations. Texas is home to nearly 28 million people, 17% of whom are foreign born, and Florida is home to nearly 21 million, 20% of whom are foreign born. In addition, both states are home to significant subpopulations among their foreign-born residents who may be particularly vulnerable in both urban and rural communities, including undocumented immigrants, DACA recipients, holders of Temporary Protected Status (TPS)<sup>i</sup>, temporary workers and farmworkers, refugees and asylum seekers.

Demographic information on affected populations will be shared as it becomes available, but here are some basic facts. According to the Migration Policy Institute, Texas and Florida rank 2nd and 4th nationwide with respect to the size of their undocumented populations, at approximately 1.5 million and 600,000 respectively, as well as the size of their DACA populations, at 120,000 and 40,000 respectively.<sup>ii</sup> Texas and Florida are also home to large populations of TPS holders from Haiti, El Salvador, and Honduras, with approximately 45,000 each. An estimated 150,000 – 200,000 migrant and farmworkers live in Florida<sup>iii</sup>, and over 130,000 live in Texas.<sup>iv</sup> Finally, large numbers of unaccompanied minors,<sup>v</sup> refugees and asylum seekers<sup>vi</sup> also call Texas and Florida home.

In general, foreign-born residents have immediate and long-term needs that are no different than those of other persons displaced or otherwise impacted by the storms. However, many also face additional challenges and barriers stemming from their immigration status, limited English proficiency, and other factors that can impede their access to disaster-relief services and their ability to rebuild their lives and communities. Harsh federal immigration enforcement policies and practices as well as state-level anti-immigrant policies exacerbate the anxiety and fear that many immigrants feel. Such concerns are especially acute for those who lack immigration status, have time-limited permission to stay in the United States, or are part of mixed-status families.

Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees (GCIR) prepared this brief to inform philanthropy's response to the impact of the storms on immigrants and refugees. The brief draws heavily on extensive analysis we conducted in 2005 in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, as well as on initial conversations with funders and organizations in affected states.

## SPECIFIC CHALLENGES FACING IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

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Like other hurricane survivors, immigrants have lost loved ones, homes, livelihoods, and worldly possessions. They need food, housing, medical care, cash, transportation, and assistance locating family members. However, immigrants also face particular circumstances that could prevent them from accessing assistance and that could create additional hardships, impairing their ability to rebuild their lives and their communities in the long term. These circumstances include:

***Unique barriers in accessing disaster relief and public benefits.*** Immigrant hurricane survivors may be unable to get accurate information about their legal rights and the services and assistance they may be entitled to regardless of their immigration status. Mixed messages from government officials, language and cultural barriers, complicated rules about immigrant eligibility for public benefits, and a generalized climate of fear due to harsh enforcement policies at the federal and state levels all combine to make it very difficult for low-income immigrant hurricane survivors to obtain relief assistance from private and government relief agencies. In general, FEMA cash assistance is not available to undocumented immigrants, TPS holders, DACA recipients, and asylum seekers. In addition, those same immigrants would lack access to civil legal aid to seek recourse to violations of rights or unfair denials.

***Complications for immigrants who lack or are unable to prove lawful status.*** Some immigrant hurricane survivors may be undocumented, while others may have lost identity documents necessary to prove lawful status. Still others may have fallen or are at risk of falling “out of status” because they have lost their jobs or work authorization documentation or because they cannot attend school in the affected areas as required under their visas. The hurricanes create significant additional logistical and financial hurdles for a range of foreign-born populations with specific legal challenges, i.e., refugees, asylum seekers, unaccompanied minors, TPS holders, migrant workers and DACAmented individuals. However, in the immediate aftermath of the storms, most urgent is the situation of DACAmented individuals whose permits expire before March 5, 2018 who must meet the fast-approaching renewal deadline of October 5, 2017.

***A hostile anti-immigrant climate.*** Immigrants’ concerns about interacting with government officials are heightened in states and localities that have adopted restrictive laws and policies. For example, Texas’ SB4 enables local law enforcement officials, including university campus police, to ask about a person’s immigration status and impedes cities’ efforts to promote public safety and community wellbeing. Although key aspects of SB4 are currently tied up in litigation, such laws add yet another barrier to immigrants seeking assistance in the context of disaster relief and recovery.

***Disruption of refugee integration services and re-traumatizing of refugees.*** Texas<sup>vii</sup> and Florida<sup>viii</sup> resettle large numbers of refugees via an established federal program. It should be noted that despite this history and experience, state governments in both Texas and Florida have become more hostile to refugee resettlement in recent years. Texas in particular has taken a hard line against refugees, suing the International Rescue Committee (a well-established refugee resettlement agency) and opting out of the federal refugee program.<sup>ix</sup> And just this past spring, refugee advocates and allies narrowly defeated a push by the Florida legislature to opt out of the federal refugee program. Restoring any disrupted refugee-resettlement services will be critical in helping this population gain or regain a foothold in their adoptive communities. In addition, many refugees, regardless of their tenure in this country, may have re-experienced trauma resulting from loss and displacement in the hurricanes’ aftermath. Making available linguistically and culturally competent mental-health professionals with experience in post-traumatic stress disorder will be critical to their recovery—and to the recovery of other hurricane survivors.

**Compromised local service infrastructure.** Community-based organizations are often in the best position to meet the specific needs of immigrants and refugees. Many target this population, have the requisite linguistic and cultural competence, and have credibility and trust in the community. Yet these groups, many of which have capacity limitations, may also be experiencing severe challenges as they seek to meet the mounting needs facing their clients and community. Some may have experienced damage to their infrastructure, and/or their staff may have been directly affected by the hurricane. This impact will, of course, vary across organizations and geographies.

**Exploitation of immigrant workers.** Experience from Hurricane Katrina’s recovery suggests that low-wage immigrant workers generally, but particularly those recruited to work on recovery and rebuilding, will likely face exploitation. With “prevailing wage” standards and sanctions for employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers likely to be suspended, wage-and-hour violations and the health and safety of vulnerable workers, including undocumented immigrants and those involved in reconstruction, will be major long-term concerns.

## **GENERAL GUIDANCE FOR A PHILANTHROPIC RESPONSE**

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Foundations wishing to respond to the needs of hurricane-affected immigrants and refugees have many options to consider. Investing in local organizations—especially those led by affected populations including immigrants—will be crucial to rebuilding strong, cohesive communities. International relief organizations play a pivotal role in providing urgent disaster relief, but once the immediate crisis is over, local organizations that know and have a stake in their community should receive support to lead long-term rebuilding. While it is still too early to develop specific funding recommendations, lessons learned and good practices from responses to prior storms provide useful guidance to foundations that are seeking to make grants.

### **General Grantmaking Principles**

**Follow the lead of local foundations and invest in existing vehicles and structures.** Local foundations with experience in immigrant and refugee funding will have the best information about what the needs are and which groups are best positioned to meet those needs. If your foundation does not currently fund in affected regions, channel funds through local community foundations, pooled funds, and multi-agency collaborations. If your foundation funds in the region, make direct grants to entities that already have relationships with and an understanding of the local communities affected by the disasters. As you seek to assess funding needs and opportunities, rely on GCIR and other philanthropy-supporting organizations for assistance in creating efficient points of contact with already-overburdened local funders.

**Address gaps in philanthropic support.** Some affected areas, like Greater Houston, have received far more donations than lesser-known areas that also suffered devastation, including Southeast Texas, e.g., Beaumont, Victoria, Corpus Christi, Galveston, Port Arthur, and Rockport. It is important to strike the appropriate balance in the provision of relief to ensure that all affected areas have the resources they need to rebuild.

**Invest for the long term.** Even if you are providing rapid-response funding, try to tie it to longer-term funding objectives to build and sustain local NGO capacity once donor fatigue sets in and the recovery no longer captivates the media and the public. In addition to supporting immediate relief efforts, foundations should develop a coordinated strategy to support the long-term rebuilding process, taking into account the unprecedented scale of these disasters and the need to support the determination, resilience, and capacity of affected individuals and communities to rebuild their own lives.

**Restore and/or enhance the capacity of existing immigrant-serving organizations.** We encourage foundations to support existing local immigrant-based organizations that have the community's trust, demonstrated the capacity to respond effectively to the needs of the hurricane survivors, and offer a clear vision for long-term rebuilding. Groups may need funds for replacement office space and basic operating materials, such as computers, phones, Internet access, and supplies. Given the magnitude of the disaster, even strong organizations will need support to expand their capacity to effectively address the scale of the problem and assist ethnic groups they had not previously served. Looking beyond immediate needs, local nonprofits will need to coordinate their work and form effective partnerships with other organizations working toward similar goals. Foundation support should encourage such efforts.

**Support the creation of new organizations, networks, and collaborations only where gaps exist.** In certain areas, limited immigrant infrastructure existed prior to the hurricanes, and new issues have emerged in the hurricanes' aftermath. In instances where appropriate grantee organizations do not currently exist, funding may need to go through national immigrant-based organizations partnering with local affiliates and other local ethnic organizations to create new capacity. Funding may also need to support the formation of new groups to build an infrastructure of immigrant-serving organizations to meet both immediate and long-term needs.

**Invest in multi-ethnic, multi-racial organizations to bridge potential divides among affected populations.** Disasters should not inflame existing divides and pit vulnerable communities against one another for scarce resources. Invest in organizations and strategies that will work collaboratively across different affected communities and defuse tensions against the backdrop of divisive xenophobic rhetoric and policy.

### **Specific Funding Needs**

In addition to following these general principles, foundations should consider supporting a range of activities to address the specific needs of immigrants and refugees, taking an asset-based approach and promoting the resiliency of these communities.

**Basic needs.** Major relief agencies and immigrant organizations are providing a range of relief services, including food, shelter, and healthcare. Immigrant organizations, which have cultural and linguistic competence, need support to increase their capacity to serve affected immigrants. If a foundation were inclined to make or has already made a grant to major relief agencies, such agencies should be strongly encouraged to make their services linguistically and culturally accessible to immigrants, regardless of status.

**Mental-health services.** Culturally and linguistically competent mental-health services will be needed to help immigrants cope with post-traumatic stress and rebuild their lives.

**Immigration and other civil legal services.** The provision of free or low-cost legal services is crucial to many low-income immigrants. Their legal assistance needs include applications for DACA renewals, alternative visa options, adjustment of immigration status, waivers of inadmissibility, representation at deportation hearings, and housing and employment matters. Since civil legal aid is generally not accessible to undocumented immigrants, who need pro bono civil legal aid to seek recourse in cases of erroneous denials of benefits, housing and employment discrimination, and workplace violations, it is critical that legal services are made available to these populations.

**Housing assistance.** All impacted residents need both temporary and permanent housing solutions. Immigrants may face additional obstacles in meeting their rental or mortgage payments, depending on immigration status and access to work.

***Livelihood assistance.*** All impacted residents will also need employment assistance, including access to reconstruction jobs and training and education, to help them re-establish themselves financially. Business owners may experience disruption of business operations that could impact their ability to re-open, and pay creditors and employees.

***Coordination of services.*** Foundations can help facilitate improved communication and coordination amongst service providers and advocates, bringing them together to share information and resources, and identify ways to work together and any gaps that need a policy solution.

***Policy advocacy.*** Local, state, and national policy advocacy will remain critical to ensure that immigrants receive relief assistance, protect their rights and immigration status, and have the opportunity to engage in the rebuilding efforts. First and foremost, advocacy is needed to ensure the traditional separation of disaster relief efforts and immigration enforcement and to push for more humane policies and procedures for immigrant hurricane survivors, including possible extensions to DACA renewal deadlines.

***Long-term planning and oversight.*** Long-term oversight of government agencies involved in the relief and rebuilding efforts is crucial to make sure that they address immigrant needs and are accountable to the community. Any future emergency plans developed by local, state, and federal government agencies should also address issues such as linguistic and cultural competency, training of staff to work with immigrants and people of color, outreach and assistance to immigrants regardless of status, as well as plans for local involvement, control, and accountability in the relief and rebuilding efforts.

## CONCLUSION

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Philanthropy has an important and strategic role to play in the recovery and rebuilding process. In supporting the inclusion of immigrants in this process—and fostering collaboration among the diverse groups that call affected areas in Texas, Florida, and other parts of the Southeast home—philanthropy can contribute to an effective recovery that builds on community resiliency and weaves together a stronger social, economic, civic, and political fabric than existed before the hurricanes struck.

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<sup>i</sup> Temporary Protected Status (TPS) is temporary immigration status granted by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service to nationals of countries with conditions that prevent their nationals from returning safely, or in certain circumstances, where the countries are unable to handle the return of their nationals. See <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/temporary-protected-status-overview>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/datahub/State-County-Unauthorized-Estimates.xlsx>; <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/datahub/State-County-DACA-Estimates.xlsx>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.floridahealth.gov/environmental-health/migrant-farmworker-housing/index.html>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.tdhca.state.tx.us/migrant-housing/docs/06-MLHfacilities.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/unaccompanied-alien-children-released-to-sponsors-by-county>

<sup>vi</sup> [http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugees-and-asylees-united-states?gclid=Cj0KCQjw0eiNBRCYARIsACEBhDMc1MHxE2pM79PbFEgUgnbz0dmDTubq1hc7zkvfowjoP7TYNLnyADAaAm9GELw\\_wcB#Asylees](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugees-and-asylees-united-states?gclid=Cj0KCQjw0eiNBRCYARIsACEBhDMc1MHxE2pM79PbFEgUgnbz0dmDTubq1hc7zkvfowjoP7TYNLnyADAaAm9GELw_wcB#Asylees)

<sup>vii</sup> <https://qz.com/569866/texas-the-most-welcoming-us-state-for-refugees-turned-its-back-on-syrians/>

<sup>viii</sup> <http://www.myflfamilies.com/service-programs/refugee-services/statistics-florida>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/2017/02/08/187112/nonprofits-formally-take-over-federal-refugee-program-in-texas/>