



COVID-19 and California's Immigrant-Led and Serving Organizations: *Meeting Immediate Needs and Rising to the Challenge of Long-Term Structural Change*

July 17, 2020

SUMMARY

Between March and May 2020, GCIR conducted more than 50 interviews¹ with immigrant-serving organizations across the state, representing a wide range of populations, geographies, issues, and strategies. These interviews sought to explore: pressing concerns related to COVID-19; strategies being deployed to address these concerns; current organizational capacity; and top policy and advocacy strategies at the local, state, and federal level.

These interviews revealed that immigrant-serving and immigrant-led organizations across the state are stretched to their limits. They are working to address urgent basic needs, test new strategies, and advocate for structural change, while managing capacity and other organizational challenges.

FOCUSING ON URGENT BASIC NEEDS

In response to the economic hardship resulting from the pandemic, many immigrant-serving and immigrant-led organizations have necessarily turned their attention to meeting urgent basic needs. Some have set up relief funds to provide cash assistance, while others are allocating significant staff time to help with applications that don't ultimately result in support. Providers are also helping immigrants access food amid reports of price-gouging and scams related to stimulus checks.

Immigrant-serving and immigrant-led organizations report that many immigrant workers, particularly those who are undocumented and/or working in informal sectors, have no safety net or recourse. For example, immigrants without paid leave are going to work even when they are sick out of fear of losing their jobs and not being able to put food on the table for their families. Those eligible for unemployment insurance (UI) are concerned that tapping that benefit might trigger public charge rules barring them from lawful permanent residency. These and other employment-related issues have increased requests for information from the community.

Immigrant groups have also been fielding concerns related to housing. Moratoriums on rent are helpful in the short term, but they compound financial hardship for those with no future source of income. And immigrants without a formal lease and/or without immigration status are at higher risk for eviction.

¹ See Appendix A: List of Interviewees and Appendix B: Interview Questions

COVID-19 further compounds mental health issues for immigrants and nonprofit staff alike. In addition to concerns about physical health and economic wellbeing, domestic violence and anti-Asian hate crimes are on the rise. Frontline organizations are overwhelmed with calls and requests for support, as their own staff struggle to manage expanded family responsibilities and increased workloads in the context of isolation and low morale.

EXPERIMENTING WITH NEW APPROACHES

Nonprofits are experimenting in real time with new strategies and tactics for outreach, service delivery, and communications.

- **Outreach:** To reach isolated immigrants, groups have disseminated community assessment surveys; tapped into nonvoter databases; and connected with parents and students through schools. They have also utilized a combination of digital and non-digital outreach strategies, including Facebook Live, text messaging, phone calls, community radio, and videos, which are essential for those with non-written languages.
- **Service Delivery:** Organizations are experimenting with large-scale, online events, such as citizenship workshops, “Tele-Town Halls,” and census information sessions.
- **Communications:** Groups are building a narrative around the impact of the pandemic on immigrants and their role in responding (e.g., farmworkers are essential to putting food on our tables, but they are excluded from protections and economic relief).

It is essential for groups to continue to test and innovate, adjust tactics, and share lessons and best practices as they go.

FOCUSING ON HIGH-RISK POPULATIONS

The pandemic has exposed many layers of vulnerability for different segments of the immigrant community: undocumented workers, LGBTQ individuals, refugees, and people with disabilities and underlying health conditions, among others.

In particular, detained immigrants face unique risks, including lack of basic sanitation supplies and the inability to practice physical distancing. Some detainees have gone on hunger strikes in protest. Given these conditions, advocates have been pushing hard for the release of immigrant detainees.

Providers are experiencing difficulty in helping their detained clients, especially in remote facilities and due to inadequate PPE for in-person visits, where they are still possible. In addition to direct legal services, litigation has been critical in addressing the immediate needs of detained immigrants and laying the advocacy groundwork for eliminating immigration detention in the long term.

Community-wide ICE enforcement actions (e.g., checkpoints, knocking on doors) continue to take place in the midst of the pandemic. In fact, the administration is using COVID as a mechanism to deport immigrants more quickly.

ADVOCATING FOR STRUCTURAL CHANGE

In every crisis, there is an opportunity. Despite the pandemic and a significant state budget deficit, immigrant groups see an opportunity to advocate for big, structural change. However, there is a finite window to push for—and potentially achieve—equitable policies that will benefit all Californians. Policy priorities include expanding eligibility for paid sick leave, health care coverage, UI benefits, employment safety standards, eviction moratoriums, and state EITC for ITIN holders. Funding is needed to bolster advocacy, power building, and organizing efforts. Due to COVID-19, policy discussions are being fast tracked, and advocates must engage now in the budgeting and public comment processes. As unemployment increases and a scarcity mentality takes hold, backlash against immigrants will likely amplify and it will be harder to achieve advocacy goals.

MANAGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

With a shift to a remote work arrangement, access to technology has become imperative for both community-based organizations and the communities they serve. Groups have a wide range of technology needs, from expanding the functionalities of their databases to equipping remote staff with laptops, printers, scanners, and WiFi. The rapid shift to a digital environment has also increased the need for social media and technology training across many different types of organizations, whether they are doing outreach, delivering services, or working on messaging and communications campaigns.

Given the ongoing climate of fear, immigrant clients are rightly concerned about virtual sharing of confidential information. Many need access to technology to receive services, including legal advice from their immigration attorneys or distance learning for their children, who are at high risk of falling behind other students. Increasing technology access is rife with partnership opportunities between philanthropy and the tech industry.

SHIFTING THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH FUNDERS

Operating in a crisis mode presents serious challenges to long-term planning. With fundraising events cancelled and public and philanthropic funding likely to decrease, groups are worried about maintaining the current nonprofit infrastructure to meet rising demand; sustaining critical work underway before COVID; and preparing for the “next big thing.”

Transparent and open communication between immigrant groups and their funders can help ease anxiety, facilitate mutual understanding of challenges and expectations, and support grantees’ ability to plan for the future in the midst of extreme uncertainty. There is also a need for flexibility to modify grant deliverables and, in some cases, to repurpose the use of funds entirely, ideally to general operating support. From the grantees’ perspective, no-cost extensions only serve to exacerbate cash flow challenges.

Finally, funders can bring grantees together to share lessons and strategies for remote service delivery, brainstorm fundraising ideas, discuss ways to support staff mental health and wellbeing, and provide mutual support in these challenging times.

For more information, contact Aryah Somers Landsberger, Vice President of Programs (aryah@qcir.org), or Kevin Douglas, Director of National Programs (kevin@qcir.org).

Appendix A - List of Interviewees

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU): Cecillia Wang, Deputy Legal Director and Director of Center for Democracy

Alianza Coachella Valley: Silvia Paz, Executive Director

Alianza Comunitaria: Lilian Serrano, Human Rights Organizer

Alliance San Diego: Andrea Guerrero, Executive Director

Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Los Angeles: Aileen Louie, Director of Institutional Giving

Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN): Miya Yoshitani, Executive Director

Asociacion Mayab: Alberto Perez Rendon, Co-Founder & Director

California Change Lawyers: Bianca Sierra Wolf, Deputy Director

California Domestic Worker Coalition: Kimberly Alvarenga, Director

California Immigrant Policy Center (CIPC): Cynthia Buiza, Executive Director

California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation (CRLAF): Amagda Perez, Executive Director

Central American Resource Center (CARECEN): Marta Arevalo, Executive Director

Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE): Maricela Morales, Executive Director

Central Valley Immigrant Integration Collaborative (CVIIC): Jesus Martinez, Executive Director

Centro Binacional Oaxaqueño: Yenedit Mendez Avendano, Co-Director; Oralia Maceda, Co-Director

Centro Legal de la Raza: Derek Schoonmaker, Workers' Rights Directing Attorney

Chinese for Affirmative Action: Annette Wong, Director of Programs

CLASP/Protecting Immigrant Families: Wendy Cervantes, Director of Immigration and Immigrant Families

Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA): Angelica Salas, Executive Director

Council on American-Islamic Relations – Los Angeles: Farida Chehata, Immigrants' Rights Managing Attorney

Haitian Bridge Alliance: Guerline Jozef, President

Hmong Innovating Politics: Nancy Xiong, Director of Development and Communications

Immigrant Defense Advocates (IDA), Jackie Gonzalez, Policy Director

Immigrant Legal Resource Center: Sally Kinoshita, Deputy Director

Immigrants Rising: Katherine Gin, Co-Founder & Executive Director

Inland Coalition for Immigrant Justice: Javier Hernandez, Director

Jakara Movement: Naindeep Singh, Executive Director

KIWA: Alexandra Suh, Executive Director

Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability: Veronica Garibay, Co-Founder & Co-Director

Legal Services for Children: Abigail Trillin, Executive Director

Long Beach Immigrant Rights Coalition: Gaby Hernandez, Associate Director

Mixteco Indigena Community Organizing Project (MICOP): Arcenio Lopez, Executive Director

Mujeres Unidas y Activas (MUA): Juana Flores, Executive Director

National Day Labor Organizing Network (NDLON): Nadia Marin-Molina, Co-Executive Director

National Immigration Law Center (NILC): Kamal Essaheb, Deputy Director; Jenny Rejeske, Interim Advocacy Director

National Day Labor Organizing Network (NDLON): Nadia Marin-Molina, Co-Executive Director

Orange County Congregation Community Organization (OCCCO): Miguel Hernandez, Executive Director

PARS Equality Center: Peyman Malaz, Program Manager

Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans (PANA): Ramla Sahid, Executive Director

PICO California: Ben McBride, Co-Director

Public Counsel: Judy London, Immigrants' Rights Project Director

Public Law Center: Ken Babcock, Executive Director

San Diego Immigrant Rights Consortium: Lilian Serrano, Chair

(continued)

Services, Immigrant Rights, and Education Network (SIREN): Maricela Gutierrez, Executive Director
South Asian Network: Shikha Bhatnagar, Executive Director
Thai Community Development Center: Chanchanit (Chancee) Martorell, Executive Director
Transgender Law Center: Ola Osaze, Project Director, Black LGBTQIA+ Migrant Project (BLMP); Zakaria Mohamed, Steering Committee Member
TransLatin@ Coalition: Bamby Salcedo, President & CEO
United Farm Worker Foundation: Diana Tellefson-Torres, Executive Director
University of California Immigrant Legal Services Center: Maria Blanco, Executive Director
Vista Community Clinic: Herminia Ledesma, Program Manager, Outreach & Migrant Health (FarmWorker CARE Coalition); Fernando Sanudo, Chief Executive Officer

Appendix B - Interview Questions

1. What are the most pressing concerns facing your constituencies (i.e., the people you serve, lead, support) in relation to COVID-19?
2. What strategies have you deployed or want to deploy to address these concerns?
3. What is your current capacity to address these concerns, including the needs of grassroots partners if you have affiliates? Would you need to increase your capacity to meet the needs? If so, in what ways?
4. What are your top policy and advocacy strategies at the local, state, or federal levels?