



Supporting Immigrant Communities in Uncertain Times

This brief is based on the closing plenary from Courage, Vision, Action, GCIIR's 2020 National Convening in Atlanta, Georgia on March 13, 2020. Speakers discussed how COVID-19 is affecting their communities, their organizations, the 2020 census, and the upcoming election, and how they are responding in real-time.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

- **COVID-19 is both an equalizer and a magnifier of disparities**, simultaneously showing how we are all interconnected and that those who are most vulnerable in our society bear a disproportionate burden in an emergency.
- **Immigrants, refugees, and asylum will be challenged on multiple fronts**, as many work in industries particularly impacted by this pandemic and lack the benefits and options available to others in responding, from paid sick days to working from home.

Immediate Impacts

- **School closures means:**
 - **Many children are missing free daytime meals and losing access to health services.**
 - **They face significant barriers when schools transition to digital learning** due to less access to the internet and the necessary technology.
 - **Their parents, particularly low-wage workers, lack childcare options.**
- **COVID-19 renders face-to-face contacts, the most effective form of Census outreach, unfeasible**, forcing organizations to switch to campaigns focused on digital outreach and advertising, which are less effective.
- **Detained immigrants are very vulnerable to COVID-19**, as conditions are crowded; access to medical care is typically slow; an outbreak could end visitation programs; and other challenges.
- **Trans communities—and the organizations that support them—face particular challenges** to their health and their ability to find needed support.

Long-Term Efforts

- **Innovation is now essential to successful outreach efforts.** For example, recruiting trusted community ambassadors who can text members of their community.
- **We have more power collectively**, by uniting our different strengths and aligning movements for equity for all people on the margins.
- **We must build the bigger “we.”** Immigrant rights encompass a wide range of movements and goals for equity and justice.

Funding Recommendations

- **Flexibility:** To respond effectively, many grantees will need to change strategies, in some cases dramatically.
- **Support the grassroots:** All broader efforts can benefit from on-the-ground experience within impacted communities.
- **Fund the ecosystem:** Funding should support services and advocacy, not either-or.
- **Capacity building:** Always a good grantmaking strategy, it is doubly valuable in a crisis.

Supporting Immigrant Communities in Uncertain Times

SESSION REPORT

SPEAKERS

- Everton Blair, Jr., Board Member, Gwinnett County Board of Education
- Jerry Gonzalez, Executive Director, Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials (GALEO)
- Maria Alegria Rodriguez, Executive Director, Florida Immigrant Coalition (FLIC)
- Estrella Sanchez, Executive Director, Community Estrella
- Ben Francisco Maulbeck, President, Funders for LGBTQ Issues [Moderator]

OVERVIEW

Much like natural disasters, the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, is an equalizing force that does not discriminate and affects people from all walks of life, demonstrating our interdependence. It has exposed and magnified longstanding systemic inequities and structural injustices for immigrants, communities of color, and other marginalized communities. Those affected range from people of Asian heritage who have experienced racist and xenophobic attacks to low-wage undocumented workers for whom not work or seeking medical care may not a viable option.

Immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers have already been living under intense fear and terror, and the coronavirus will make life even harder on multiple fronts, particularly because much remains unknown. Philanthropy and the movement have the responsibility and opportunity to work together to address immediate health, social, economic, and other impacts of this pandemic; push a bold policy agenda from health care and paid sick leave to expanded worker and tenant protections; and advance long-term goals to shift the narrative, change culture, and build the bigger “we.”

IMMEDIATE IMPACT

General

- Lack of access to health care and paid sick leave for workers who fall ill or who need to care for ill family members.
- Inability of many workers, e.g., restaurant and construction, to work from home.
- Loss of income leading to hunger, homelessness, economic insecurity, etc.
- Cancellation of community and other events.
- Necessary change of strategy by immigrant groups from face-to-face outreach to organizing in the virtual world.
- The physical and mental health impact on staff of immigrant-serving organizations and their communities.
- Limiting physical contact and social distance are critical to preventing the spread of the virus, but touch is a key part of the healing work in many immigrant communities.

Schools

School districts serving low-income students are heavily impacted. Gwinnett County, Georgia has moved to digital learning, but much of their student population, which is 76% Black, Latinx, and Asian, has limited access to the internet. Closing schools means that students will not have access to free breakfast and lunch, nor to social and health services, such as consultations with a nurse or psychologist. It also makes it more difficult to know how your community is doing.

In Florida, one group of organizations is ready to activate a Community Emergency Operations Center, a collective effort they've developed to respond to hurricanes, to provide meals and childcare needed if schools close due to the pandemic. Schools are balancing a number of issues in alleviating students' anxiety, guarding against both complacency and panic, and trying to prevent a health crisis.

2020 Census

COVID-19 undermines the main census outreach strategy of massive face-to-face conversations with community members. In light of health and safety concerns, GALEO is suspending census field operations and pivoting to digital, phone, text, and ethnic media. Unfortunately, these are not the most effective ways to do this work. GALEO has been discussing contingency scenarios and recognize the need to get creative. One idea is to have community members serve as ambassadors and reach out to everyone they know via their cell phone. The current administration wants us to be invisible, but we will not be invisible.

Voter Engagement

COVID-19 will have a huge impact on voter registration and engagement efforts. FLIC had set a voter registration goal of 75,000 and is currently at the 36,000 mark. It will need to reassess plans going forward. Digital voter registration is challenging in a state like Georgia where there is widespread voter suppression and having a paper trail is critical to proving discriminatory impact. Groups have to both address voter suppression and motivate communities to register and vote. It is challenging to convince someone to register or to vote in normal circumstances, but with the current levels of fear—both of deportation and now the coronavirus—it is even harder. Finding ways to create connection and to build solidarity will be essential in overcoming these obstacles.

Undocumented Trans Community

The cancellation of community events and support groups, driven by the need to socially isolate, has taken away a key element of support for this community. Refraining from hugs and touch is particularly difficult for this community, as contact is central to how members, particularly those who are Latinx, connect and heal. This virus also uniquely threatens this community's health, as trans people, especially those with HIV, are at higher risk from this virus.

Detainees

Georgia has four detention centers. The possibility of the pandemic getting into the detention center is frightening and would be devastating on many levels. Detainees have limited access to health services (it can take 3-4 days to get medical care). Moreover, visitations at the detention centers would be restricted, and contact will be limited to phone calls, which are very expensive for detainees. There is already one suspected case of COVID-19 in a detention center in Florida.

LONG-TERM ISSUES

Gwinnett County Board of Education

- Unlike past school closures where days were simply added to the end of the year, this is a challenge that does not have a clear end, and it is unclear how to proceed. It does not yet make sense to formulate policy around this response; in four or five years the structure of our education system and society could look very different. We are trying to determine whether this is a “now” response or a “forever” response.

- We need to build long-term infrastructure. We have a lot of work to do to diversify leadership, develop innovative solutions, and build a larger movement.
- We must be guided by those doing direct work on the ground. For instance, the International Newcomer Center in Gwinnett County, which exists in various forms in many school districts, is essential in our approach to students from immigrant and refugee families. By providing a high-quality education, resources for parents, and core services like translation, we can easily transition students to the general population. The needs that arise in this center informs higher level efforts to address the issues facing that population.

Florida Immigrant Coalition (FLIC)

- Our long-term vision remains the same: shift politics, narrative, culture, and the underlying mental model. We see the opportunity for a bold policy agenda that pushes for access to healthcare, moratorium, paid sick days, permanent solutions for TPS and DACA.
- Don't pigeonhole immigrant rights into one category. The work is about building the bigger "we." We are a star in a constellation. We are a workers' rights movement. We are a racial justice movement. We are part of an international movement to address root causes of migration and poverty. We are investing in youth and access to college. There are many ways to see the work we are doing. This is not just reframing and repackaging but looking at the root causes and understanding that we are all part of the American family.

Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials (GALEO)

- We need to come together, not just in Georgia, but across the Southeast, to exercise our collective power. Long-term infrastructure building takes time and has a big payoff. Investments in civil and human rights organizations in Georgia—and coalitional work across immigrant, refugee, and African American communities—have kept anti-immigrant legislation from passing over the past three years.
- GALEO partnered with the NAACP to sue the Gwinnett County Board of Education over representation, an effort grounded on shared values and shared destiny. It was also a rare case on multi-race voting rights discrimination, which is harder to prove. The case settlement contributed to the election of Everton Blair, Jr., the first African American member to the board. However, we must keep the pressure on because more representation is needed.
- Think long term, particularly in the South, and move out of the boom-or-bust cycle around the elections. Invest in integrated voter engagement to build long-term power. Support redistricting next to build power. It will take time to dismantle a white supremacist system and to build something new. This is slow, patient work generally and especially when reaching the most suppressed voters. But there are glimmers of hope and progress. For example, only 30% of Latino voters turned out in 2012. That increased to 40% four years later, and now eight years later, it is 47%.

Community Estrella

- For trans leaders, it takes two or three times the work to find support, to find grant opportunities. Now COVID-19 is causing the cancellation of the conferences where leaders and groups can make new funding connections, such as [Fundors for LGBTQ Issues'](#) recently cancelled annual event.
- There are many organizations working with trans immigrants, including recently released detainees, that need additional capacity. Examples include [Casa Anandrea](#) and [Amor Y Solidaridad](#), which support trans people leaving detention in Texas and New Orleans, respectively. [Mariposas Sin Fronteras](#) also did this work in Tucson, Arizona, until recently pausing its operations.

- We need to have patience with this crisis. It is a time for solidarity and not for competition, whether between nonprofits or between immigrant-serving organizations and foundations.
- Look to grassroots organizations that have the pulse of the community, and build their capacity including healing justice and solidarity work. Resources include the [Latino Community Fund Georgia](#), [TGI Justice Project](#), [Trans Justice Funding Project](#), [Fundors for LGBTQ Issues](#), and, in Florida, [Pridelines](#) in Miami and [QLatinx](#) in Orlando. However, given that many organizations serving trans people struggle to maintain regular hours, it is important not to raise expectations when directing people to these resources.

Narrative Change

- FLIC is working with the University of California, San Diego to do listening calls to hear people’s thoughts about the Census and other issues. Based on those learnings, FLIC is collaborating with the Othering and Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley to develop messages that build unity among those on the margins. They are seeking to bridge and build, without compromising their truth, to bring together marginalized groups, and support directly impacted communities to be intentional in their storytelling. This is their first collaboration of this type with academia.
- FLIC also works to make sure we do not leave people out and leave them behind. For example, when we say “a nation of immigrants,” we “invisibilize” the original peoples of this land and diminish the brutality of slavery. We must address anti-Blackness. “We” can build the bigger “we” because we have so much more in common.

WHAT FUNDERS CAN DO

- Adopt a mindset of planning for action, instead of reacting to the latest development, and support boldness and creativity in your grantmaking.
- Allow grantees to adapt goals and strategies—and be flexible with deliverables and outcomes.
- Be mindful of the stresses and strains on immigrant-serving organizations. Support their resilience and perseverance, including their ability to stay grounded in why they do this work and their ability take care of their staff and their communities through retreats and wellness programs.
- Understand that a mix of strategies is needed. Advocacy vs. services is a false dichotomy, and we cannot be fundamentalist about any single strategy.
- Find ways to partner with and support chronically underfunded public institutions because they have the mechanism in place to support all community members.
- Support the ability of immigrants to empower themselves, work with one another and other communities, and build real solidarity.
- Work with grassroots and other grantee organizations as equal partners, embrace patience in times of crisis, and see the wisdom and experience that they bring to the partnership.
- Invest in grassroots leadership, including informal organizations led by volunteers.
- Pay as much attention to local issues as national ones.
- Maintain civic participation and voter engagement funding across non-election years.