

Community-led Disaster Relief for Excluded Immigrant Workers

Addressing policy gaps and strengthening community infrastructure

ASIAN AMERICAN &
PACIFIC ISLANDER
POLICY INITIATIVE

“You have to have a certain amount of paperwork to demonstrate that you have worked at this place for a certain amount of time. And so really, it became about case management and our organization had never really done case management before. I think as organizers, there’s a level of case management and kind of social work incorporated into doing organizing work. So we are familiar with that level of it, but it became just like, really daunting. And again, this pressure that our staff felt knowing that these are our people, these are our folks, and you can’t turn anyone away”

– Lisa Fu, Executive Director, California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented epidemiological disaster that compounded experiences of social and economic suffering across the population. Yet, its immediate and ongoing consequences have disproportionately affected poor and working-class people in Black, LatinX, Native American, and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities. Immigrant workers in low-paid, informal jobs—many of whom are undocumented and in mixed status families—experienced particularly acute crises. Unable to do paid work during government-mandated shutdown periods and excluded from multiple sources of government pandemic relief, undocumented immigrants in informalized jobs were largely abandoned—left to find ways to meet their daily survival needs (e.g. food, shelter and essential health care) on their own without a basic social safety net.

This research asks how immigrant workers who were excluded from state-funded pandemic relief were able to survive the pandemic. What resources and networks did they draw upon? What organizations stepped in to address policy gaps and what support did they provide? We present preliminary findings from interviews and surveys with workers, staff, and leaders across five Southern California community-based organizations

(CBOs). Our project was designed in partnership with Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance and the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative, both of which led substantial community-based disaster relief efforts in the AAPI community by serving as first-line responders and creating essential infrastructural capacity.

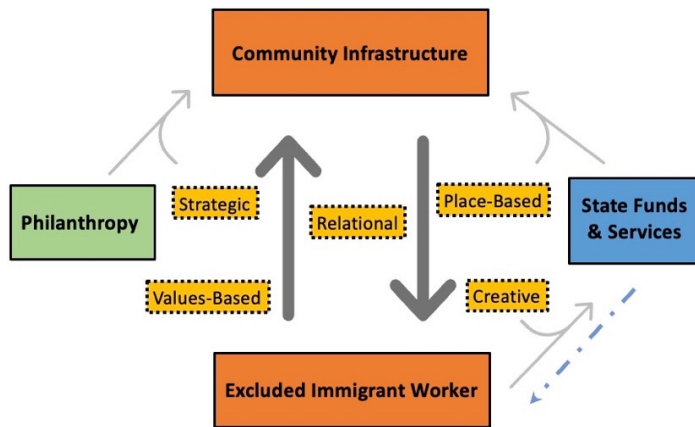
Key Findings

Gaps in State-Based Response to Undocumented and Informal Workers

Immigrant workers faced multiple barriers to accessing immediate disaster relief when non-essential industries such as the restaurant and nail salon industry were entirely shut down, more than once, between 2020-2021.

1. They were unable to earn income by working from home and unable to access multiple sources of state-funded relief such as cash stipends from the federal government, extended unemployment insurance, emergency rental assistance and other sources of government aid.
2. When schools, churches, community centers and free health clinics, were shut down, they lost access to meals and other basic services, which especially impacted school-aged children and low-income seniors.
3. Immigrants who were eligible for state-funded relief faced additional barriers to accessing unemployment insurance and rental assistance due to limited English proficiency and the digital divide.
4. During periods without any sources of income generation, immigrant workers reported relying on savings, adult children who worked from home or as essential workers, and ceasing remittance payments to families abroad.
5. They also reported feeling high levels of isolation, fear, loss, invisibility and death.

Figure 1: CBO Infrastructure in the Pandemic: How Los Angeles and Orange County CBOs responded to the needs of immigrant workers. (Source: Authors)



“The infrastructure we built—it’s now permanent—but we had to have a conversation, an almost existential conversation within our organization, because it’s not just this pandemic but future pandemics. It’s the state of the world. Climate catastrophe, the effect on food, the displacement of people, and all of that. I see more pandemics in our future. We need to build out the infrastructure to be ready for this and we need to sustain it.”
 – Chanchanit Martorell, Executive Director, Thai Community Development Center

Community-Based Organization Support Response

In the context of institutional neglect, community-based organizations (CBOs) with a long-term history of and commitment to grassroots organizing with immigrant workers—also known as immigrant worker centers—immediately stepped in to provide community-based disaster relief by becoming “first-line responders” and “never closing their doors” throughout multiple government shutdowns. CBO leaders and staff with existing community connections, in-language skills, and co-ethnic staff redirected existing resources to provide immediate cash, food and public health assistance and actively sought out additional resources that could reach families and communities the state failed to reach. This organizational pivot entailed addressing state funding gaps and building infrastructure for provision of critical emergency needs, including what would qualify as disaster relief efforts in the form of public health, food, and housing-related responses.

Examples of support responses include:

1. **Internal restructuring:** redefining existing staff roles and hiring new staff to provide direct emergency relief support and frontline assistance.
2. **Distribution of cash aid:** millions of dollars of cash assistance to over 120,000 undocumented workers and other immigrants in need of immediate cash assistance—a distribution of aid to about 7-8% of the total undocumented population in CA.

3. **Implementing Ad hoc health clinics:** creating new services and programs to respond to public health crisis, including access to COVID-19 testing, mobile vaccine coordination, and distribution of personal protective equipment; this was a new area of service for many groups.
4. **Food distribution:** Operating food pantries and establishing fresh food access points in residential communities.
5. **Survival and social access point:** for housing, food, health care, legal, and other basic household needs and multi-lingual access to changing information about state policies regarding industry closures and re-openings, new pandemic relief programs and

Figure 2: Koreatown Vaccination Site for Seniors. (Source: Annenberg Gen Space)



services, and measures to combat anti-Asian harassment and violence.

6. **Addressing the Digital Gap:** front-line, multi-lingual support with online technologies such as Zoom, web-based application portals, creation and maintenance of online user accounts, and follow-up support when applications stalled.
7. **Advocacy:** receiving and utilizing private sector donations from individuals, philanthropic organizations, and other groups to strengthen coalitions and change restrictive guidelines and/or policy in the short and long-term.

Recommendations

1. **Increase support for CBOs extending services to undocumented and informal workers:** The organizational pivot made by immigrant worker centers during the COVID-19 pandemic ensured that over 100,000 undocumented immigrant workers and other low-paid, informally employed immigrant workers were able to access vital sources of economic support, food assistance, and public health services. However, many undocumented and informal workers remained outside of reach and without assistance. Post-pandemic working conditions also reveal new trends towards the

intensification of work and the prevalence of unfair labor practices.

2. **Enforce labor standards across the restaurant and nailcare industries:** Restaurant workers report that many workers are expected to perform tasks and responsibilities while short-staffed and without pay increases as restaurants manage an upsurge in customers. Nail salon workers report that many businesses have not reopened and those that have reopened are no longer hiring older workers. Nail salons that have reopened are also continuing to engage in informal compensation practices, despite the formal employment of workers on the payroll, emphasizing the need for labor standards enforcement.
3. **Strategize aid for the ageing immigrant population:** Both industries, and our community partners, report that of particular concern is the ageing immigrant population. Along with the state and national population in general, the “silver wave” is not coming but is here – and undocumented seniors are no longer able to return to work. Having served, already, many years as the backbone of the immigrant and broader state-side economy, many of these seniors are left with no forms of aid and ongoing precarious housing and income needs beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 3: Weekly Food Distribution: Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (July, 2022). (Source: Authors)



“I would like to see the recognition of our people. People who have been here 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 50 years... People who are 70 years old and still on the fields working very hard because they don't have enough money to pay for their basic needs to live. I would like to see dignity in their lifetime, policies in Sacramento that recognize dignity and humanity. Communities that are seen and spoken about as disposable is really hurtful to me.”

– Anabella Bastida, Director of Member Services, CHIRLA

4. **Reinforce CBO infrastructure to support enforcement of labor standards through organizing that prioritizes social justice:** The ability of CBOs to engage in ad-hoc emergency response efforts highlights the essential community infrastructure that they have built as immigrant worker centers that have long been the only source of organizational support for undocumented workers and other vulnerable groups. This community infrastructure reflects the multi-scalar capacities that have been cultivated to address livelihood and health-related crises resulting from violations in basic labor standards such as failure to receive minimum wages, unpaid wages, and exposure to dangerous workplace health and safety conditions. These multi-scalar capacities include developing flexible organizational structures that can respond to short-term and long-term crises with multiple stakeholders, from workers who are directly affected by threats to their livelihoods, health, and well-being to government officials and agencies to private sector donors and philanthropic organizations. They also include cultivating relational, intersectional and place-based organizing practices that promote social

justice principles that refuse to abandon vulnerable groups that the state fails to protect.

5. **Make sustainable funding sources available to support CBOs and their efforts:** To ensure immigrant worker centers continue serving communities that state policy often excludes or fails to reach, the essential community infrastructure they have built—which has been developed through over 30 years of grassroots immigrants' rights organizing—must be supported by permanent funding sources and revenue streams. Sustainability and long-term infrastructure must be inclusive of undocumented immigrants and include as part of the structure the ways in which CBOs are responsive, and flexible—thus building capacity to include workers who cannot or will not turn to the State for aid.

Figure 4: Photo of mosaic outside KIWA's offices.

Source: Authors



"You cannot rebuild without the immigrant population. Immigrants must be part of the recovery effort. We [CBOs] are the front line when the system falls apart, and so we need to be part of that system in order to help people at the end of the day."

– Apolonio Morales, Director of External

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