

# 'We're Ignored Completely!' Amid the Pandemic, Undocumented Immigrants Are Essential But Exposed



Agricultural laborers pick lemons inside the orchards of Samag Services, Inc in Mesa, California, on March 27, 2020. Brent Stirton—Getty Images

BY LISSANDRA VILLA

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**O**n normal mornings, Maria, an undocumented worker at an orchard in Washington state, gets up at 5:00 a.m. The 37-year-old immigrant from Mexico puts her hair up in a bun, wraps it with a handkerchief to keep it out of the way, and packs a snack for her morning break and a small meal for her half-hour lunch. Then she sets off on the half-hour drive to the orchard, arriving so

early there's often frost on the trees. Her work depends on the season; right now it's the grueling task of securing branches to ensure they grow correctly.

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, Maria is classified as an essential worker, which means she has to keep going in even as large sectors of the economy have shut down. She has a letter from her employer to prove it. Though she says her hours have been cut in half because of COVID-19, she's still expected to show up. It was only last week, Maria says, that her employer finally gave a presentation about maintaining six feet of distance while on the job—which she says is impossible to do—and requesting that workers wear a face cover and gloves, which are not supplied.

“The fear that we have as immigrants is something whose extent only we can know. We're afraid of getting sick. We're afraid of dying,” Maria tells me in Spanish. “We're afraid of complaining at work, to our supervisors, because we're not getting adequate cleaning supplies. We're ignored completely.”

Maria is one of an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S., many of whom are now working the essential jobs the nation is relying on—in apple orchards and grocery stores, food processing plants and hospitals. The Migration Policy Institute **estimates** that 6 million immigrant workers (a figure that does not take into account legal status) are in jobs on the front lines of coronavirus response, while another 6 million are in industries hardest hit by the pandemic. In normal times, undocumented labor is a pillar of the U.S. economy. In these extraordinary times, immigrant advocates say lawmakers must recognize the contributions that essential undocumented workers are making.

“At a time of crisis, when America needs a certain segment of its society to keep functioning so that we can all be safe and healthy, a significant chunk of that indispensable workforce is not formally recognized as Americans,” says Frank Sharry, executive director of America's Voice, an immigration advocacy group. Those workers, he says, “are risking their lives in order to serve the country they call home.”

Yet despite paying **billions of dollars** annually in taxes, undocumented immigrants were ineligible for the direct deposit relief doled out by the \$2.2

trillion coronavirus stimulus bill. None will receive the cash assistance that millions will get as a result of the relief package passed by Congress; the payments were tied to Social Security numbers as opposed to Individual Tax Identification Numbers, over Democrats' objections.

Most undocumented immigrants will also not receive unemployment insurance if they're among the millions who lose work due to the pandemic. With **few exceptions**, undocumented workers are not eligible due to their immigration status under normal circumstances. At a time when **22 million Americans** have filed for unemployment benefits, this has left countless undocumented immigrants in financial uncertainty.

Then there's access to testing and treatment. According to the ACLU and National Immigration Law Center, the Families First Act **excluded tens of millions of people** (among them, **DACA recipients** and Temporary Protected Status holders) from testing and treatment by not making it available under emergency Medicaid, which would lift the immigrant eligibility restrictions currently in place. The stimulus package included funding for testing at community health centers, which undocumented immigrants can go to for services **regardless of their** status. And undocumented immigrants will **indirectly** have access to **other benefits**.

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Still, some undocumented workers are leery of seeking treatment. Germán, an undocumented immigrant from Mexico who works at a dairy farm in Wisconsin, says he would avoid a hospital for as long as he could if he got sick with coronavirus. "We keep working like any other day," he says. "I hope after this pandemic, the people get the point that we are in their communities, we are your neighbors, we are your friends."

There are some efforts underway to help undocumented immigrants struggling financially amid the pandemic. California's governor, Gavin Newsom, announced a **\$125 million relief effort** on April 15 to provide cash assistance to families in need that lack legal status. "We feel a deep sense of gratitude for people that are in fear of deportation but are still addressing the essential

needs of tens of millions of Californians,” Newsom reportedly said **when he announced** the partnership with nonprofits.

But advocates argue more needs to be done. “States can help fill the gap, but this should be coming from Congress, and they should not have left out tens of millions of people,” says Manar Waheed, senior legislative and advocacy counsel at the American Civil Liberties Union.

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Immigrant advocacy groups **say they want** guaranteed access to testing and treatment for coronavirus and economic relief. “It’s important that we address those in whatever packages come forward in the next couple of months,” says Carlos Guevara, senior policy adviser on immigration for UnidosUS, a Latino civil rights group. But when it comes to the political prospects, Guevara says there’s more work to be done, and that he’s hoping to “see deeper inroads” with the Administration and congressional Republicans.

So far, the Trump Administration has made mild policy changes. President Trump has said that undocumented immigrants can **seek testing for coronavirus** without fear of deportation. ICE has **temporarily halted most enforcement activity** and limited it to “**public safety risks** and individuals subject to mandatory detention based on criminal grounds.” And U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services has **released guidance** that seeking treatment or preventative services will not count as a strike under the Public Charge rule.

“It’s crystal clear that anything having to do with immigration is a big fight with the President and with Senate Republicans, but here, even for them, it’s different, because this is a matter of a public health emergency and also an

economic meltdown,” says Texas Rep. Joaquin Castro, chair of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. “There’s been some change in posture from the Administration, but they’ve not gone far enough.”

Among those calling for change is Peggy Noonan, a former speechwriter for President Ronald Reagan. In a [Wall Street Journal op-ed](#), Noonan argued that the pandemic makes the case for those who argue that immigrants need to “earn” citizenship. “Here is where the debate is going,” Noonan wrote. “When it’s over, if you can show in any way you worked through the great pandemic of ’20, you will be given American citizenship. With a note printed on top: ‘With thanks from a grateful nation.’”

U.S. Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, a Republican from Florida who has long been involved in conversations about immigration reform and who was one of the first congressmen to contract COVID-19, says he is open to a pathway to legal status for those who worked on the frontlines of coronavirus response.

“We should look at folks who have served in important roles in our society as potential people who deserve a pathway towards legalization,” says Diaz-Balart, who believes most Americans support an earned pathway to legal status but isn’t sure Republicans who “have been dead-set against any sort of legalization” will change course due to the pandemic.

The irony of the current situation is not lost on the immigrant workers deemed essential. “It doesn’t seem fair to us, because really, we’re the ones who are working,” says Felipe, an immigrant who works at a hog farm in North Carolina, in Spanish. While Felipe is a documented immigrant worker, his wife, who works at a vegetable packing shed, is not. “So it seems to us a little wrong that they not help us for the simple fact that we’re undocumented. They’re not helping the people who work.”

Raul, an undocumented worker at an Oregon beef feedlot, says he feels as though he’s being used by politicians, and doesn’t expect the pandemic to change the conversation on immigration. But he’s clear-eyed about Americans’ reliance on the undocumented workforce: “They need us.”

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