

Statement for the Record
Submitted to the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary,
Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and Border Safety

On Hearing Titled:
“The Essential Role of Immigrant Workers in America”

Submitted by:
UnidosUS
Raul Yzaguirre Building
1126 16th Street NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20036-4845

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Introduction

UnidosUS, formerly the National Council of La Raza, is the largest national Latino¹ civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States. For more than 50 years, we have worked to advance opportunities for Latino families to enhance their significant contributions to the social, economic, and political tapestry of our great nation. In this capacity, UnidosUS and its Affiliate Network of nearly 300 community-based organization in 36 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, work to provide education, health care, immigration, housing, workforce development, free tax preparation, and other services to millions of Latinos in the United States each year.

Through our Affiliate engagement, we have cultivated deep ties with on-the-ground communities across the country and serve these diverse constituents by amplifying their voice to legislators. Namely, we have documented stories and collected data that depict how workers and families of color have been systematically excluded from the U.S. social safety net since its inception. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Hispanic workers—already in precarious standing due to existing, discrimination-fueled disparities—have suffered extreme economic dislocation. To develop an equitable vision for recovery and advancement for our nation, it is critical for legislators to develop a genuine understanding of these hardships.

In this statement for the record, we reassert one of the central arguments UnidosUS has made since the start of the pandemic: a pathway to legalization and citizenship for all undocumented essential workers is an integral part of a comprehensive pandemic recovery plan, and must be among the suite of policy solutions considered in pandemic recovery legislation. These individuals, a significant number of whom are Latino, have kept our nation afloat, contributing along the frontlines of essential industries as documented below. Meanwhile, without legal status and the protections it affords, many have been unable to access the critical health, nutrition, and other economic supports like unemployment insurance during the historical COVID-19 pandemic. These failings aren't just bad for workers and their families, they also expose and destabilize our workforce at a time when the nation can least afford it. We have a unique opportunity to ensure an equitable recovery for everyone, and providing a pathway to citizenship for undocumented essential workers is important piece of the way forward.

The impact of COVID-19 on our communities

The COVID-19 pandemic has afflicted all communities throughout the United States, nonetheless its disproportionate impact on individuals and families of color is well documented. Among Hispanics, our community is twice as likely to contract COVID-19, four times as likely to be hospitalized for it, and three times as likely to die from the virus.ⁱ This disturbing trend, in part, results from the sizable portion of Latinos who occupy essential, in-person jobs, and is

¹ The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

substantiated by research like our own which confirms that Latinos are among the least likely of the ethnic/racial groups to work in jobs that can be done remotely.ⁱⁱ Long-standing structural barriers, including but not limited to language barriers, poor job quality, and immigration status, have arguably compounded the risk of Latinos being employed in sectors that increase the possibility of exposure to COVID-19.

Despite Hispanics stepping up and working at the frontline of the pandemic as more particularly described in the section below, the overall community has been dealt a staggering financial setback within the past year. According to our analysis, since March of last year, 59.9% of Latinos reported that they or someone in their household experienced a loss of income, relative to 42.5% of non-Hispanic Whites.ⁱⁱⁱ And, among Hispanic immigrants, unemployment has doubled over the course of the pandemic—from 4.4% to 8.8% according to the Migration Policy Institute.^{iv} The impact is only further exacerbated when accounting for legal status: in New York City, for example, 60% of undocumented workers reported having either lost a job or being at risk of losing it, compared to 36% of workers overall who expressed similar sentiment.^v

A combination of pandemic induced job losses, high concentrations of jobs that can't be done remotely, and lower levels of access to the social safety net, inevitably impacts other areas of wellness for Latinos. In October of 2020, UnidosUS released an interactive dashboard—"By the Numbers: Latinos in the Time of Coronavirus"—that visibly demonstrates the deadly and disproportionate impact of COVID-19, nationally as well as in states with large Latino populations such as Florida, California, and Texas.

Analyzing data from the U.S. Census Bureau's experimental Household Pulse Survey, the tool finds that as of February of this year:

- Hispanics, at 19%, reported at more than double the rate as non-Hispanic whites, at 7.7%, that they sometimes or often did not have sufficient food to eat in the last seven days.^{vi}
- Of those living in renter occupied-households, 21.5% of Latinos, in comparison to 12.4% of non-Hispanic Whites, missed their rent payment for the previous month.^{vii}
- In California, 25.5% of Latino households with children under the age of 18 reported not having sufficient food in the past week, relative to 11.7% of non-Hispanic white households. This rate and gap have been steadily increasing since winter of 2020.^{viii}
- The share of Latino adults age 18 and older living in owner-occupied households in Florida that missed the previous month's mortgage payment stands at 17.5%, while the rate is a meager 6.5% for non-Hispanic White adults.^{ix} The National Association of Hispanic Real Estate Professionals reports that 2020 marks the sixth year in a row that the national Hispanic homeownership rate has increased. However, the increasing inability of many Hispanic households to consistently meet mortgage payments presents a threat to this achievement.^x

While these figures include Latinos regardless of immigration status, research and anecdotal evidence suggests that undocumented communities are likely facing even greater impact

stemming from ineligibility for critical state and federal relief programs. Unlike many Americans for whom government interventions like the CARES Act and American Rescue Plan mitigated the economic harm of the pandemic, many undocumented workers and families were effectively excluded from such relief plans. Put differently, some in our community are going on over a year without any support, and a primary reason is related to their immigration status.

A deeper dive into our nation’s essential workers



In a recent report, the Center for American Progress (CAP) shared that an estimated five million undocumented immigrants—approximately three in four undocumented individuals in the labor force—are essential workers.^{xi} Latinos, despite accounting for only 17.6% of the U.S. workforce, comprise a salient portion of many of these essential occupations. According to a UnidosUS analysis of U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data from last year, Latinos represent 54% of agricultural workers, 29.7% of food manufacturing workers, and 29% of medical assistants.^{xii}

These Latinos, key to maintaining the food supply chains and the health of this country during the pandemic, are working—and putting themselves at risk—at a disproportionate rate relative to other demographics. Data by CAP points out an analogous overrepresentation for undocumented individuals. The organization has documented that despite making up 4.4% of the country’s workforce, undocumented immigrants, including but not exclusive to Latinos, work in striking numbers in similarly arduous jobs. They make up 23% of construction laborers, 22% of maids and housekeeping cleaners, and 21% of landscaping and groundskeeping workers.^{xiii}

The contributions these communities have made to our nation’s economy invalidates the false assertion of critics that foreign-born workers steal jobs from, oftentimes blue collar, American-born workers. Literature on the topic has repeatedly emphasized that immigrants work in professions that most American-born workers do not actively seek out, given their physical- and time-intensive nature. Moreover, in addition to stimulating the economy with their spending power, many undocumented workers contribute through local and federal taxes as well. Undocumented workers and their households, according to CAP, contribute \$79.7 billion in federal tax contributions and \$41 billion in state and local tax contributions. These households tout \$314.9 billion in spending power, a capacity that would only increase if given the opportunity to adjust status.^{xiv}

In a March 2021 report titled “A Path to Prosperity: The Macroeconomic Benefits of Four Immigrant Regularization Scenarios,” the UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Initiatives (UCLA LPPI) thoroughly explore the aforementioned opportunity. In an argument for a joint approach to legalization and post-pandemic relief and rebuilding efforts, the report unpacks the economic growth that would emerge from providing citizenship to all unauthorized workers, a strategy that is in line with President Biden’s proposed U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021. If Congress pursues this more inclusive route to modernizing the immigration system, the move would result in a conservative estimate of \$367 billion in cumulative new tax revenues, create 371,000 new jobs in 2031, and generate an additional \$1.5 trillion in national GDP cumulated over the next 10 years.^{xv} According to UCLA LPPI, these approximations would drastically dwindle if legislative reform is solely applied to DACA recipients and farm workers.

Our community has stepped up for America. America must do the same and legalize essential workers.

While they remained sidelined in government relief efforts, Latinos are stepping up for the nation, including several Latino community organizations across America. For example, through the UnidosUS ***Esperanza Hope for All*** initiative, we are helping broach the recovery gap by allocating more than \$2 million in grants to 35 Latino-serving community organizations, including our network of federally qualified health centers.^{xvi} Some of the laudable efforts by our Affiliates include the following:

- The launch of a nationwide mobile community education tour regarding vaccines: Starting this spring, our Affiliates sought to take information about the COVID-19 vaccines directly into Hispanic neighborhoods across the country, including rural and urban communities where health resources are lacking or difficult to access.^{xvii}
- Chicago-based Affiliate Gads Hill Center supporting individuals like Diana Rodríguez, a 25-year-old mother and DACA recipient, and her family with rent after they were laid off from their jobs. Despite President Biden’s executive order to extend protections against evictions, many individuals were unaware that they must submit a form to their landlord to ensure said protection.^{xviii}
- Food assistance efforts by our Affiliate El Centro, a group of *promotoras* based in Kansas City. Over the course of 12 weeks, they hosted drive-through food distribution events that provided fresh fruits and vegetables to 4,800 Latino households. To further sustain these efforts, El Centro also offered one-on-one assistance to individuals applying to SNAP and the pandemic-specific EBT card.^{xix}

Despite the uplifting sentiment of these stories of community collaboration, these types of mutual aid efforts cannot, alone, substitute for a pandemic relief strategy. Indeed, ongoing focus groups we are conducting with undocumented essential workers are elevating the stories of hardship and of fraying workers and families. One female parent from Florida we spoke to expressed her dissatisfaction with government relief:

“Many people actually did lose their jobs. In addition, we were excluded from the stimulus money because we don’t have legal documents. But we do pay our taxes, so that’s a kind of discrimination. I have a work permit, but my husband doesn’t. It makes me angry because the government says: “They are essential workers, we need them.” But then, where is the support for them as well? Sometimes it makes me angry because I would be going through the same if I didn’t have my work permit. I once was once in that position. I know how it is like to not have documents and be excluded from things even though you work hard, contribute to the country, pay your taxes, and behave. It makes me angry because the government says: “Yes, farmworkers, packers, and people who work in construction are essential workers.” Yes, but they don’t help them, where is the support for them?”

Latinos and undocumented immigrants require a more concerted showing of government support. This must include legalization for the undocumented.

Conclusion: Support for legalization and the road there

The efforts made by migrant farm workers to maintain food supply chains, by immigrant health care aides to tend to COVID-19 patients and the elderly, and by migrant workers as a whole are ample evidence that immigrants are an inherent fabric of American society, and are worthy of the same protections and guarantees as U.S.-born citizens. A path to legalization, and eventual citizenship, appropriately commemorates this community for their service, better includes them in relief and recovery efforts by the government, and ensures that they can continue to contribute to the economic well-being of this country for years to come.

It is in Congress’s power to finally modernize our immigration system and avoid many of the past and current pitfalls that are making it increasingly unsustainable. UnidosUS supports the passage of the “U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021,” which represents a bold yet sensible way forward to do just this. We also support incremental measures that tackle aspects of that vision, so long as Congress commits to action in 2021. Examples of measures that Congress could take action on now include:

- Enact the “Citizenship for Essential Workers Act,” which would provide undocumented essential workers with a fast, accessible, and secure path to citizenship, beginning with immediate adjustment of status to legal permanent resident.
- Enact the “American Dream and Promise Act” and “Farm Workforce Modernization Act,” each passed by the House of Representatives in March 2021.
- Reactivate and update existing provisions in our immigration laws like INA 245(i) and the immigrant registry.
- Enact the “Reuniting Families Act,” which would, among other things, repeal the three- and 10-year bars, as well as the permanent bar on admission for individuals unlawfully present in the United States from adjusting to legal status. The bill also makes more family-based immigration visas available.

- Modernize Section 240A(b) of the INA pertaining to the cancellation of removal by lifting the limits on how many people can apply per year (currently a scant 4,000 annually).

Please feel free to contact Carlos Guevara (cguevara@unidosus.org) for any questions raised by this statement.

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ⁱⁱ Parker, Kim; Horowitz, Juliana Menasce; Minkin, Rachel. “How the Coronavirus Outbreak Has – and Hasn’t – Changed the Way Americans Work.” Pew Research Center. 9 December 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/12/09/how-the-coronavirus-outbreak-has-and-hasnt-changed-the-way-americans-work/> (accessed May 3, 2021).

ⁱⁱⁱ UnidosUS. “By the Numbers: Latinos in the Time of Coronavirus. Adults with Employment Income Loss. United States.” UnidosUS. <https://www.unidosus.org/campaigns/coronavirus-covid-19/Latino-COVID-19-Dashboard> (accessed May 3, 2021).

^{iv} Migration Policy Institute Data Hub. “U.S. Unemployment Trends by Nativity, Gender, Industry, & More, Before and During Pandemic.” Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/migration-data-hub/us-unemployment-trends-during-pandemic> (accessed May 3, 2021).

^v Torrens, Claudia. “Some immigrants, hard hit by economic fallout, lose homes.” AP News. 4 May 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/immigration-health-coronavirus-business-07183bf8f43b078efbc8a67fd3f9ba2a> (accessed May 3, 2021).

^{vi} UnidosUS. “By the Numbers: Latinos in the Time of Coronavirus. Households that Do Not Have Enough Food to Eat. United States.” UnidosUS. <https://www.unidosus.org/campaigns/coronavirus-covid-19/Latino-COVID-19-Dashboard> (accessed May 3, 2021).

^{vii} UnidosUS. “By the Numbers: Latinos in the Time of Coronavirus. Adults in Households that Missed Last Month’s Rent Payment. United States.” UnidosUS. <https://www.unidosus.org/campaigns/coronavirus-covid-19/Latino-COVID-19-Dashboard> (accessed May 3, 2021).

^{viii} UnidosUS. “By the Numbers: Latinos in the Time of Coronavirus. Households with Children that Do Not Have Enough Food to Eat. California.” UnidosUS. <https://www.unidosus.org/campaigns/coronavirus-covid-19/Latino-COVID-19-Dashboard> (accessed May 3, 2021).

^{ix} UnidosUS. “By the Numbers: Latinos in the Time of Coronavirus. Adults in Households that Missed Last Month’s Mortgage. Florida.” UnidosUS. <https://www.unidosus.org/campaigns/coronavirus-covid-19/Latino-COVID-19-Dashboard> (accessed May 3, 2021).

^x Limón et al. “2020 State of Hispanic Homeownership Report.” National Association of Hispanic Real Estate Professionals. 20 April 2021. <https://nahrep.org/downloads/2020-state-of-hispanic-homeownership-report.pdf> (accessed May 3, 2021).

^{xi} Svajlenka, Nicole Prchal. “Protecting Undocumented Workers on the Pandemic’s Front Lines: Immigrants are Essential to America’s Recovery.” Center for American Progress. December 2020. https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2020/12/01095848/Making-The-Case-For-Legalization.pdf?_ga=2.104448704.1945692736.1620665685-1677381982.1619194653 (accessed on May 3, 2021).

^{xii} UnidosUS. “The Latino Community in the Time of Coronavirus: The Case for a Broad and Inclusive Government Response.” UnidosUs. 9 July 2020. <http://publications.unidosus.org/handle/123456789/2066> (accessed on May 3, 2021).

^{xiii} Svajlenka, Nicole Prchal. “Protecting Undocumented Workers on the Pandemic’s Front Lines: Immigrants are Essential to America’s Recovery.” Center for American Progress. December 2020. https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2020/12/01095848/Making-The-Case-For-Legalization.pdf?_ga=2.104448704.1945692736.1620665685-1677381982.1619194653 (accessed on May 3, 2021).

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} Hinojosa-Ojeda et al. “A Path to Prosperity: The Macroeconomic Benefits of Four Immigrant Regularization Scenarios.” UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Initiative. 23 March 2021. https://latino.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/LPPI_Economic-Benefits-of-Legalization_03.23.21.pdf (accessed on May 3, 2021).

^{xvi} Gomez, Gabriela. “News Release: UnidosUS Unveils Esperanza Hope for All Campaign.” UnidosUS. 24 March 2021. <https://www.unidosus.org/about-us/media/press/releases/032421-UnidosUS-Announces-Esperanza-Hope-for-All> (accessed May 3, 2021).

^{xvii} UnidosUS Blog. “UnidosUS and its Affiliates bring vaccine information directly to our community.” UnidosUS Blog. 15 April 2021. <https://blog.unidosus.org/2021/04/15/unidosus-and-its-affiliates-bring-vaccine-information-directly-to-our-community/> (accessed on May 3, 2021).

^{xviii} So, Agatha. “Housing Protections and Assistance: Helping Latino Renters in the COVID-19 Pandemic.” UnidosUS Blog. 10 February 2021. <https://blog.unidosus.org/2021/02/10/housing-protections-and-assistance-latino-renters-covid/#more-18918> (accessed on May 3, 2021).

^{xix} UnidosUS Blog. “‘Food insecurity has been overwhelming.’ Our Affiliates fight against hunger.” UnidosUS Blog. 22 December 2020. <https://blog.unidosus.org/2020/12/22/food-insecurity-has-been-overwhelming-our-affiliates-fight-against-hunger/> (accessed on May 3, 2021).