

New Research Report Reveals Pandemic Lessons From Immigrant Essential Workers

MALDEN, Mass, December 13, 2021 / New research titled *Immigrant Essential Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, released today by The Immigrant Learning Center Public Education Institute, offers a detailed examination of immigrants' experiences and contributions to the country's perseverance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite immigrants' essential contributions, the general public lacks an understanding of immigrant workers' lived experiences and how closely their wellbeing is tied to the nation's wellbeing. By supplementing labor force data with in-depth interviews of policy experts, community organizers and immigrant essential workers in health care, retail and food supply, this report seeks to fill that gap and offer insight into how the nation can better respond to the next public health crisis.

Making up 18.3 percent of all essential workers, immigrants are critical to helping all Americans stay fed, obtain necessary supplies and access medical care, never more so than during a pandemic. Sixty-nine percent of all immigrants and 74 percent of undocumented workers in the U.S. labor force are considered essential.

One interviewee, a nursing assistant from Nigeria working in Minnesota, expressed, "Some people pushed me to stay at home, but I'm healthy so I can work. I didn't think that quitting was an option. I am healthy and it is the right thing to do." She also shared challenges, such as, "There were times I would go out and I'd need to stop somewhere on the way to work and people would look at my scrubs and treat me like I was diseased."

Many immigrant workers lacked the support and resources available to other Americans. The lack of protections or status under COVID-19, immigration, and labor policies led to significantly worse economic and health challenges among immigrants. Licensing restrictions kept foreign-trained health care workers out of hospitals when intensive care units were full. An estimated 6.2 million essential workers were ineligible for relief payments under the CARES Act, which impacted the 3.8 million U.S. citizen children in their care. Poor working conditions for meatpackers and farmworkers led to virus outbreaks and pressures on food supply chains. Language barriers, misinformation, and mistrust of the government made accessing information and resources more difficult even when they were available.

Vicente Reyes, an undocumented farmworker, student and member of the United Farm Worker Foundation, said, "I know firsthand that being an essential worker does not mean that we get more protections. I am aware that the agricultural industry has received billions of dollars in COVID-19 legislation, yet no one in our family or in our crew has received masks, special instructions about workplace safe distancing, anti-bacterial soap or hand sanitizer. Not once has our employer screened us for symptoms."

In addition to uncovering problems, this report also reveals some solutions. Some states retooled licensing requirements or created programs to accelerate the integration of foreign-trained health care workers into the labor force to combat the pandemic. Stakeholders such as community organizations, health centers and even local radio stations made efforts to bridge the gaps.

The United States needs immigrants working alongside the U.S.-born to get through times of immense adversity, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. *Immigrant Essential Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic* provides timely insights into improving outcomes for immigrant workers and, as a result, the entire country.

About The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc.

The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc. of Malden, Mass, is a not-for-profit organization that gives immigrants a voice in three ways. The English Language Program provides free, year-round English classes to immigrant and refugee adults in Greater Boston to help them become successful workers, parents and community members. The Public Education Institute informs Americans about immigrants and immigration in the United States, and the Institute for Immigration Research, a joint venture with George Mason University, conducts research on the economic contributions of immigrants. For more information, visit the website <http://www.ilctr.org>. The ILC can also be found on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Pinterest.

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