

UIDN UPDATE FEBRUARY 2021

FEBRUARY: It's been the shortest, coldest, snowiest and most jam-packed month since January of *last* year.

Here in Ulster County, our network in defense of immigrants continues to bring thoughtful, practical, and material support to our friends. We have also expanded our collaborations with other community groups and looked for ways to address additional unmet needs.

Meanwhile, from the nation's capital to Albany, it's been a month of shifting political gears: from the hyper-electioneering of 2020 to the slogging battles for new laws and improved administration that will dominate 2021. For our immigrant friends, the stakes are high, and not at all assured.

Let's review first what we ourselves have been up to.

RIGHT HERE IN ULSTER COUNTY...

New Health Care Committee Launched: As vaccines become available, UIDN is committed to making sure that the inequality playing out across the country does not happen here. Our new Health Care committee, consisting of clinicians, public health professionals, and science educators, has begun work. A two-hour bilingual call-in each Wednesday evening will answer our friends' COVID-related questions and direct them to needed resources. Meanwhile, other volunteers are conducting interviews with Latinx clergy and community leaders to get a deeper understanding of barriers to safe practice, attitudes toward vaccines, and how UIDN can help keep the community safe. Educators on the committee are also considering ways of educating households through their school children.

The Health Care Committee is still in formation. If you would like to help with this work, please be in touch with Elana Michelson 845 658 9838: michelsonelana@gmail.com

The Food Pantry Continues: Unemployment persists in this COVID economy, especially for our friends in low-paid sectors, and for parents who need to spend more time at home with their young children who are learning remotely. Families burdened by reduced and lost wages greatly appreciate our weekly food share every Wednesday, 4-6 PM, at Holy Cross Santa Cruz Church in Kingston.

The numbers of families seeking assistance has grown steadily through the winter. In the last week of February, our Household Support Team helped 130 families, while UIDN's food costs have doubled in the past month, from \$1250 each week to \$2500 each week. Continued support from regional foundations and foodbanks, added to our own fundraising, have made this possible. We are looking forward to warmer weather, so we can resume holding the pantry outside, where our friends will be able to select what they want and need. Currently, to

accommodate both social distancing and the bitter cold, our volunteers are pre-packing bags with standard items.

These weekly Wednesday pantries are also an opportunity for our friends to learn about other resources, including access to health services and rides to appointments through our Transportation Committee. The pantry also offers some needed household items donated by UIDN supporters. If you have clothing or lightly used household goods you would like to donate, please contact Leslie at lilacless2@yahoo.com. Personal hygiene products, diapers, and Enfamil Infant formula are also always welcome.

Call the Helpline: Meanwhile, UIDN's Helpline remains the most important entry point for our immigrant friends to seek assistance. To offer 24/7 assistance, we continue to need more bilingual volunteers; please contact Nic (nicabramson@gmail.com) to join this essential team.

Rent and Utilities: During COVID, we have seen temporary state and federal moratoriums on eviction and mortgage foreclosure. On January 31, as the federal moratorium was scheduled to expire, President Biden extended it to March 31. Meanwhile, Governor Cuomo and the NY legislature pushed a state moratorium to May 1 for renters. The moratorium also covers homeowners who cannot make mortgage payments, if they complete a form to establish that they experienced financial hardship resulting from the pandemic.

While direct federal relief payments during COVID did not cover immigrants, the moratorium does cover immigrants as well as others. But utilities are not covered. And unpaid rent mounts up and will ultimately be due. So, once again, February set a record for UIDN rent and utilities assistance. During the first three weeks of February, UIDN's Rent & Utilities Team helped 38 families.

We estimate that UIDN distributed over \$55,000 dollars of assistance in February, either from our own funds or from cooperating regional foundations. That's up from \$20,000 in one month to keep families housed and sheltered from the cold. We know that these expenditure levels are not sustainable, but we expect these costs to decrease as we move into warmer weather and people get back to work. We will continue to monitor these costs closely.

Volunteers Stepping Up to Help Kids in School: This has been an especially difficult year for students who are English-language learners (ELL) and need personal help that is harder to get online or in reduced class time. To continue to support students, UIDN's School Outreach Committee (SOC) designed two programs, one in New Paltz and the other in Kingston.

SOC continues to provide an online "Reading Together" program for a group of immigrant children in New Paltz. Meeting one-on-one with adult volunteers, the students get valuable exposure to conversational English along with practice in reading.

And, in Kingston, the SOC has a team of twenty volunteer tutors lined up at the starting line for an online one-on-one weekly tutoring program, with students from grades 1 through 12. The Kingston City School District has embraced the project and will enable UIDN volunteers to share screens with the student participants through KCSD's IT resources. As we finish this UPDATE, the students, too, are lined up, ready to go, at the beginning of March. And, to make the tutoring most useful, the tutors will have guidance from classroom and specialist teachers about the needs of each student.

Of course, UIDN does not work in a vacuum. We need to keep our eye on significant trends in the wider society. After last fall's elections and the seating of new office holders in the state and nation, we can see how the actions of government officers and agencies directly affect the welfare of our friends and neighbors, right here in Ulster County.

The Bigger Housing Issue: For years now, a high proportion of families living in Ulster County has been "rent challenged" (paying more than 30 % of their monthly income) and "severely rent challenged" (paying more than 50% of their monthly income). Our friends are generally among these groups. In fact, housing non-affordability is independent of COVID's impact on paychecks. Additionally, at the present time, the housing market in Upstate NY is "hot," and owners of many rental properties are eager to raise the rent or clear out their current tenants to convert the property for a wealthier clientele.

Understanding the power of coalition work and of unity in numbers, UIDN is represented in the **Ulster County Coalition for Housing Justice** (UCCHJ.squarespace.com), where we publicize these trends and mobilize residents to demand public policies that will help to protect renters, rapidly generate new stocks of guaranteed affordable housing, and ensure that an unchecked real estate market does not force the removal of lower-income residents.

One immediate outcome of the Coalition's work is a video, in both English and Spanish, to educate us all about the existing legal rights of tenants during the moratorium. We expect this video to be accessible on UIDN's website in the near future.

In addition, the Housing Coalition is now completing additional short videos in English and Spanish focusing on the housing crisis in Kingston. UIDN's Community Education and Outreach committee is working with UCCHJ to offer a public education event, on Zoom, on **Friday, March 19**, with expert panelists and stakeholders to present facts, proposals, and immediate actions we can take to address the housing needs of Ulster County's low-income immigrants and others.

We Advocate for Mental Health Resources: All of our communities depend on public agencies for critical health and mental health care, especially in this time of multiple stresses. HealthAlliance Hospital, in Kingston, has for years provided 40 beds of specialized in-patient mental health care and 20 in-patient beds for substance use dependent care – the only such

beds in the County. Westchester Medical Center (WMC) operates HealthAlliance under license from New York state.

When Governor Cuomo asked HealthAlliance to reserve those beds temporarily for possible emergency COVID use, WMC quickly agreed and then spoke openly about transferring the specialized services permanently to WMC hospitals outside Ulster County. Many county officials and health care advocates have gone on record as opposed to WMC's plan, which effectively abandons one of the commitments in its license. These specialized beds need to stay here, in Kingston, to serve both Ulster County and counties to the north. UIDN joined forces with other local groups to amplify this need by writing letters to the NY State Commissioners of Mental Health and to Alcohol & Substance Addiction Services. To date, WMC has not proceeded with a formal request to remove the beds permanently.

AND IN ALBANY...

Many New Yorkers who have lost employment and income during the COVID crisis are left out of all federal subsidies. Currently, 1.2 million New Yorkers are blocked from receiving unemployment benefits and other forms of emergency income relief, such as federal stimulus checks. Undocumented immigrants are among the most affected by this exclusion. Undocumented New Yorkers contribute more than \$140 million in unemployment taxes every year. Immigrants in New York City alone represent 54% of all essential workers in the industries hardest hit by the pandemic, including food service, cleaning, and hotels. A similar pattern exists in Ulster County.

But New York State can correct this injustice.

The Excluded Worker Bailout Fund (S4543/A5421), sponsored by Senator Ramos and Assembly Member de la Rosa, would establish a fund for workers excluded from unemployment assistance and stimulus relief. The bill will provide direct, flat-rate monthly cash payments to families, retroactive to the beginning of the pandemic and continuing until the COVID emergency is over. New York's labor unions support the bill, which has now been referred to the Senate Finance Committee.

Undocumented New Yorkers are often excluded from unemployment compensation or other income relief programs because such programs require official proof of loss of employment, like a pay stub, which is often difficult to obtain for undocumented workers. **The Excluded Worker Bailout Fund** would have flexible application and proof requirements, including identification requirements and self-attested loss of income. This bill will fast-track relief to families, given the urgency of this crisis.

UIDN supports the Excluded Worker Bailout Fund as a statewide extension of the work we are striving to do for our immigrant friends.

You can lend your own support by calling your state legislators to let them know that you favor passage of S4543/A5421. You can also read the bill itself, find legislators' addresses and phone numbers, and even leave them a note at nyassembly.gov or nysenate.gov.

AND IN WASHINGTON...

The Biden administration arrived in Washington promising to restructure US immigration policy and practice. Legislative changes would create a shortened and predictable path to permanent residence and citizenship for 10 to 12 million undocumented immigrants, whether they have lived in the US for many years or have just arrived last year. Biden also called for restructuring the roles of federal immigration agencies, such as ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) and US Customs and Border Protection, within the Department of Homeland Security. And he promised to undo administrative actions of the Trump years. These included family separations of asylum seekers at the border, and also the massive revision of procedural rules that Trump had intended to effectively block immigrants from gaining protected status or permanent residence (e.g., a "green card").

At this early point, President Biden has proposed a comprehensive legislative reform bill, now before committees in the House and Senate. Biden has also appointed Alejandro Mayorkas, once a childhood immigrant himself, as Secretary of Homeland Security, and assigned him to eliminate the punitive regulatory changes of the Trump years and to figure out how to reunite hundreds of children and families forcibly separated at the border and still not reunited, in violation of court orders, under Trump. Progress on these tasks has been slow, and some immigration enforcers have planned to resist the reform orders of the new Secretary and the new President.

In each of these areas, reforms under Biden could make life much less precarious for our immigrant friends in Ulster County. Delay or failure to make reforms could make our friends' lives much less secure. We will monitor the status of the reform effort in future issues of the UIDN UPDATE.

Thanks for reading!

If this issue of the UPDATE has stoked your interest in volunteering, please let us know. For work with the food program, contact Leslie at lilacless2@yahoo.com. For other areas, contact Helaine at helainemeisler@yahoo.com

We have lots more information, in English and Spanish, about our work and about resources available in the community. Please see UIDN on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). Donate [here](#).

And, thank you, again.