

UIDN UPDATE for March 2021

Spring is busting out all over: here, there and everywhere.

And just in time! It has been a very hard winter for our immigrant friends. COVID and its impact on health and employment were relentless burdens for a population already extremely rent-burdened in “normal” times. Undocumented immigrants were excluded from past federal stimulus payments in 2020. The moratorium on evictions did cover them, and has been extended multiple times, but each new deadline poses a new threat to be faced, with little or no savings to make up missed rent payments. Families scrimped and often doubled up to stay sheltered, and many finally sought help, especially from UIDN and our partners.

In response, our monthly outlays for rent, utilities, food and household support have jumped almost 50% above projected costs. We have been seeking new and renewed grants and contributions to respond to these needs.

We hope that the new season will bring some relief from COVID and unemployment. But we also have our eye on developments in Washington and Albany – and even here in Ulster County -- that may significantly help in the near future and start to turn the tide for the long run. This edition of UPDATE will take a quick look at all these developing possibilities.

Right here, right now...

OUR HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT PROGRAM has served record numbers of individuals and families with food and other household goods through the winter months. The numbers of adults and children that we helped rose steadily over the past three months. For this three-month period, the average monthly recipients at our weekly Wednesday afternoon food pantry (4:00-6:00 p.m.at Holy Cross Santa Cruz Church) were 955 adults and 586 children.

We also distribute clothing and kitchen items at the Wednesday pantry. And at other times this month, volunteers delivered emergency food and larger items of furniture – 4 beds, 3 bureaus, 3 sets of tables and chairs, a crib – all donated from various sources. (Comedy Resistance, a theater group in Poughkeepsie, arrived one day on motorcycles with 150 masks.)

The household support program and food pantry were spotlighted when Ben Nandy visited for a story on Spectrum News. Another story, by Shayne Durkin, appeared in her Onteora High School newspaper. She is one of the dedicated volunteers who bring the pantry to life each week. (If you have food or household items to contribute, contact Leslie, lilacless2@yahoo.com.)

RENT AND UTILITIES are, financially, the most challenging needs of our immigrant friends. We continue to work with Catholic Charities to meet urgent rent needs. Utilities are also covered, with special concern for internet access so that children can attend remote classes at public school. But the recent increase in need has forced us to set limits on what UIDN itself can

provide: a cap of \$500/month per household, and a total cap of \$3000 per household from the start of the coronavirus a year ago. Within those limits, we were able in the last month to serve many families in need and refer others to Catholic Charities.

HELPLINE AND CASE MANAGEMENT: Our Helpline (**1-888-726-7276**) has been the first entry point for our immigrant friends looking for help. Available seven days a week, the Helpline connects callers to bi-lingual volunteers who can refer them to help, either within UIDN or from other agencies. UIDN also has a Case Management Team of volunteers who work directly with our friends when they present more complex issues, keep records of all requests and our responses, and help our friends with applications to other agencies. Together, the Helpline and case-managers gauge and respond to the needs of the community.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES: Both the Helpline and Case Management teams do need more volunteers. To explore that possibility for yourself, contact Nic (nicabramson@riseup.net) for Helpline or Stephanie (skristal55@gmail.com) for case management.

STAYING CONNECTED. Several recent initiatives have aimed to increase the ability of our immigrant friends to stay connected with resources and move about in the larger community:

Our **TRANSPORTATION AND ACCOMPANIMENT** team has been distributing local public bus schedules and helping with critical rides for those without other means.

Many immigrants rely on **TEXTING** for communication, and we now have a means to send essential information to large groups of people by text, if we have their phone numbers.

Our **HEALTH TEAM** has been helping our friends get access to COVID vaccinations. Pastor Fernando Salazar, a member of UIDN's Board of Directors, co-hosted a pop-up vaccination site at his church, 2da Iglesia La Mision Asamblea de Dios in Kingston on March 27. We are hoping to facilitate another clinic in a few weeks.

Our **COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND ADVOCACY** team is helping immigrants pass the DMV's NYS written test, which is required to receive a driver's license. As partners in the **Green Light** project last year, we helped change the law and are now partnering with the Worker Justice Center NY and some talented volunteers to produce and present a non-interactive, video-based webinar series on how to pass the test.

And for non-drivers, we continue to acquire and distribute bicycles and grocery carts, all part of helping our friends stay connected to the resources of Ulster County.

WEBSITE AND SOCIAL MEDIA. We continue to post expanded and updated information on [Facebook](#), @UlsterIDN on Twitter, and on our [website](#). New resource pages include [transportation](#) and [school food](#). Key upcoming events are [here](#) with a more extensive list on our Facebook [calendar](#).

SCHOOL OUTREACH: Our work here continues to focus on Kingston and New Paltz, where volunteers have been tutoring school-age English language learners. Public school teachers, administrators, and social workers have been collaborating to support tutoring in this period of constant change, as schools moved first to remote learning and now progressively back to in-person school days. The tutoring itself is done online once a week with about 30 students, from elementary through high school. These programs will have a chance to grow as schools return to “normal” and try to make up for lost learning opportunities during COVID. School personnel have also sought our help in strengthening ties between the schools and immigrant families.

HOUSING JUSTICE: Across Ulster County, existing rental units are rising in cost, beyond the reach of more and more low-income renters, and new units at affordable rents are not being built to meet the need. Half of renters, and most of our immigrant friends, are rent-burdened (paying more than 30% of income for rent and utilities). Home sales increased by 46% between 2015 and 2019, while rental cost rose 15.5%. During the recent intense wave of COVID gentrification, investors have “flipped” 1,027 apartments in Kingston and 1,800 apartments have become short-term rentals. Scarce vacancies and rising prices are forcing low-income households, including our immigrant friends, out of their homes, with nowhere to turn.

UIDN is an active member of the [Ulster County Coalition for Housing Justice](#). The [UCCHJ website](#) lays out the basic problem and a strategy for community efforts to resolve it. Right now, that means raising public awareness and winning support. On March 19, UCCHJ held a public [webinar](#) that attracted nearly 200 people. Community leaders and county officials offered data on the crisis and its human consequences, as well as solutions. [Get videos and leaflets](#), in English and Spanish, on tenants’ rights.

The bottom line: Ulster County needs to build more low-rent dwellings at guaranteed affordable prices. That will require zoning and regulatory changes and public education to understand why everyone has a stake in fixing this crisis.

Our **FUNDRAISING** team has been working overtime in the face of rising needs, to find and secure new grants and to solicit donations. Here’s a shout-out to donors who answered our mid-month request, including one supporter who contributed their entire federal stimulus check. Thank you!

WE’VE GOT INTERNS: To round out this summary of UIDN “right here, right now” we note with appreciation our current-semester interns from Vassar College and SUNY New Paltz. They and their colleges agree that UIDN is both a good place to volunteer and a good place to learn. They have slipped quickly into diverse roles, and we welcome their energy and contributions.

But there is more to this story than “right here, right now”...

The Biden administration submitted major bills affecting immigrants in its first week. Congress and the state legislature in Albany were already in session. In all of these arenas, proposals are under consideration or already passed that promise to help our friends and 11 million others in

their situation. Here in Ulster County, UIDN and allied groups are pressing the county and the City of Kingston to address the local version of a nationwide housing crisis. The outcome of state and national legislative battles may well determine the fate of our local housing campaigns, as well as our capacity to continue serving the needs of our friends. Take a look:

THERE IN WASHINGTON, RIGHT NOW...

Three major legislative initiatives have important implications for our immigrant friends. Biden's \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan (ARP) has already become law. The proposed US Citizenship Act of 2021 is now in committees and likely to take many months before it comes to a vote. And a massive infrastructure bill has not yet been proposed but may dramatically improve the employment and housing opportunities of immigrants if it passes.

ARP is already sending stimulus payments to most American households. It also increases tax deductions and refunds for dependents and expands funding for many other existing programs that serve low-income households. A small fraction of immigrants without permanent residence status are eligible for these benefits, **but most have once again been excluded.**

ARP also provides enormous sums for emergency rent assistance and housing support, and these resources do seem to be accessible to renters without regard to their immigration status. These funds will be administered by state and local governments and grantees.

For UIDN, the immediate challenge is to help our friends find out if they are among the lucky few who qualify for ARP stimulus support and/or tax credits, and if so, how they can apply. Rent support also will require timely applications to agencies we are working to identify.

The really big bill that would aid our friends the most is the proposed Citizenship Act. It would confer protected status for five years on nearly all immigrants who were here before January 2021. After that, they could seek permanent legal residence (a "green card"), and three years later, full citizenship. It has many other valuable features, and it faces a very difficult obstacle course through Congress. Meanwhile...

UP IN ALBANY, NOW AND LATER...

UIDN, with our coalition partners, is an advocate for the **Excluded Worker Bailout Fund** that aims to make up for the fact that all federal stimulus and support payments passed in the past year have left out millions of New Yorkers, especially low-income and immigrant households. Right now, key state legislators support the bill, but they have included in their budget proposal only part of the funds needed. Public pressure is needed. April will be another busy month.

Thanks for reading...