

UIDN UPDATE JULY 2021

If you volunteer with Ulster Immigrant Defense Network, your midsummer night's dreams are busy, hopeful, and strongly tinged with anxiety. At the outset of July, anti-Covid vaccinations were spreading through the population, but not as quickly as we had hoped. Then the new delta variant raised the numbers of new cases and positive tests, heralding a fourth wave with special danger for those still unvaccinated.

Still, the economy and employment seem to be returning to normal. Vast sums of federal relief money were distributed -- some directly to taxpayers and most to state and local governments. ***Will any of that money reach our immigrant friends?*** Here is the story, so far.

HOUSING SECURITY

Back in June, the number of families seeking help with rent and utilities had begun to decline, and last month the NYS legislature created the Excluded Workers Fund (EFW) to ensure that those left out of federal relief programs, i.e., most of our friends, would still be helped. Then too, New York's rent moratorium was extended to the end of August, unlike the federal moratorium that lasted only to the end of July. So, things were looking up, right?

In July, however, rent and utility assistance from UIDN, which had declined in May and June, rose again, to more than \$20,000. While many renters got back to work, a UIDN volunteer noted that "workers get sick or injured and mothers must tend to their children's illnesses -- and of course our friends live on the edge and don't get sick leave pay."

Meanwhile NYS did not start distributing its federal rental assistance in July, and we are still waiting two weeks into August. Although the Biden administration has just declared a new moratorium through early October, which will likely cover Ulster County, the critical need is to get financial aid into the hands of excluded workers, and in the case of renters, into the hands of their waiting landlords.

UIDN is part of a coalition of non-profits pressing the state into action and, at the same time, demanding that the state's application procedures not be unreasonably complicated. Volunteers are currently exploring ways to provide excluded workers with reliable guidance on filling out forms that are prerequisites for much of the relief.

Backdrop for all of this is the tightening housing market in our area. While many individual landlords have been supportive of those who struggled to pay their rent during Covid, many larger landlords hope to evict even paid-up tenants so they can charge much higher rents or sell their properties at current high prices. Thankfully, housing advocates are demanding new legislation that will prevent evictions unless there is a "good cause" other than a wish to cash in on an inflated market. Such legislation may be especially helpful to many of our friends.

THE PANTRY CONTINUES

July also saw the continuation of our Wednesday afternoon, free, outdoor pantry program at Holy Cross/Santa Cruz Episcopal Church in Kingston. The food and household goods distributed focus on basic needs to help tight budgets stretch further, but they are not enough to support a family. More than 100 families, and over 500 individuals, are served each week. Some friends drop out as their circumstances improve, but others arrive as word of the program spreads.

Financial grants and in-kind donations provide food for the pantry. Household and hygiene items are purchased or donated by individuals. In one corner of the church grounds a flourishing vegetable garden is beginning to yield produce for the pantry. It is the project of several children, ages 6 to 14, who are making their own contribution to the community supply.

On some Wednesdays, staff from the [Institute for Family Health](#) are on hand to offer wellness checks, help friends with questions about health resources, and make referrals. Other community groups also table and share information with the pantry shoppers.

As the U.S. has resumed honoring its international legal obligations to asylum seekers, UIDN has helped a small number of new arrivals settle into apartments or join family members already here. Pantry coordinators expect to see more new arrivals. Finding basic furnishings for as many as ten newcomers has become a monthly chore, and donations of used basic furniture are welcome – beds, chairs, tables, bedding, towels, cooking implements, dishes, etc.

Finding rentals is often more challenging. If you are aware of safe and affordable rentals, please contact [Father Frank Alagna](#) or [Stephanie Kristal](#).

If you or someone you know is interested, the pantry welcomes donations of household goods, as well as donations of time on weekends to help move furnishings into living spaces. Contact [Leslie Gallagher](#); she can answer your questions and help you schedule your time.

COURT IS NOW (AGAIN) IN SESSION

In mid-July, the federal immigration court in Manhattan reopened after a Covid-forced suspension of many months. Our friends seeking asylum must check in on a regular schedule with immigration authorities, and less often must attend hearings on their applications. In the past UIDN has provided transportation and accompaniment for friends not yet familiar with getting around the city and/or in need of help with the expense of these trips. Such costs will rise again for UIDN, but so far there have been few such trips because the immigration courts have an enormous backlog of cases before they get to our friends here in Ulster County.

Meanwhile, we also provide transportation and accompaniment to five or six friends each month for essential medical or other appointments. Most recently we supported several new asylum seekers on the last leg of their journey. They were cleared to come from the Mexican

border and landed at regional airports to join family or friends here. **If you or someone you know is fluent in Spanish and would like to help with transportation, [Sara Henderson](#) would love to hear from you.**

EMERGENCY TRAVEL FUND REUNITES FAMILIES

As the Biden administration clears more immigrants held in detention at the border to be reunited with family members and friends living in the U.S., they face major travel expense to reach new homes.

This spring, one of our immigrant neighbors, age 20, paid the travel costs to release his 25-year-old brother and his brother's 5-year-old daughter from detention in Texas to their new home in Kingston. Previously, he brought his 18-year-old sister up from detention. He then paid transportation costs to release a co-worker's wife and two children from detention; UIDN helped his effort by paying a driver to pick them up at the airport. On the way to Kingston, the driver, hearing that the children had not eaten in two days, stopped to buy them food.

Inspired by our young friend's compassion and generosity, the liaisons of UIDN's three affiliated synagogues created an Emergency Travel Fund. Together, Jacki Brownstein, Susan Griss, and Joy Weinberg gathered over \$3,500 in pledged donations to reunite Ulster County immigrant families whose family members and friends were being held at the border.

Thus far, the fund has paid to reunite three Kingston families whose loved ones were picked up at airports after days of often-arduous travel. The lack of money to purchase food before arrival is common; more of our drivers have now purchased food during the drive to Kingston.

As family members/friends continue to be released from detention and travel to Kingston, UIDN contacts people who have previously pledged money to the Emergency Travel Fund. Donors pledge in \$100 increments: * \$100 covers transportation from Albany Airport to Ulster County; * \$200, from LaGuardia or Newark Airport to Ulster; * \$300, airport to Ulster, plus help with settlement upon arrival.

If you would like to pledge funds to help UIDN continue to reunite families/friends, please email [Elana](#). If you wish to contribute a smaller amount to help with relocation costs for arriving family members/friends, please donate to our "[general support](#)" fund.

SCHOOL YEAR-ROUND

Covid truly knocked the stuffing out of public schools for the past year and a half. It almost did the same for UIDN's school outreach efforts. But UIDN volunteers and school staffs across the county are focused on how to resume "normal" school and support programs as the new school year approaches. Both Kingston and New Paltz, site of most of UIDN's efforts, are running extra summer school classes to help children catch up after the limitations of online learning.

As public health authorities urge a resumption of masking indoors and plan for possible future vaccination of kids under 12, school systems appear determined to take up the next challenges of Covid using federal recovery funds to make buildings safe enough for in-person learning.

UIDN volunteers in New Paltz and at Kingston's Chambers Elementary had to abandon most in-person work with children. In New Paltz, ten volunteers adapted to one-on-one reading with children in grades 1-4. Reading Together began with in-person meetings then shifted to online work, which has continued through the summer. All parties -- volunteers, children, parents, and "English as a New Language" (ENL) teachers -- have found it gratifying. Now the school district is contemplating funding the UIDN effort so that more materials are available for online work.

In Kingston, UIDN's major effort had been a weekly after-school in-person activity program. Covid ended the project, and several volunteers offered to continue working online one-on-one. Some, but not all, of those pairings worked well and are ongoing. Meanwhile, UIDN was invited to participate in planning discussions with the Kingston superintendent. We used this opportunity to encourage more interaction between the administration and immigrant families. It is not clear whether future UIDN work in Kingston schools will be on in-person or on-line.

SHORT TAKES AND COMING EVENTS

- **WILL RECOVERY FUNDS EVER REACH OUR FRIENDS?** The next few weeks will tell us whether NYS will manage to get millions of federal relief and state excluded worker funds out the door. We will also learn whether the state's application procedures avoid obstacles that can prevent our friends from completing their applications. Stay tuned.
- **EARLY PEEK AT COUNTY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PLANS.** County Executive Pat Ryan appointed a Behavioral Health Task Force four months ago to recommend how to spend \$5 million in recovery funds to improve county services. The task force will report at the end of September, but a public forum on the draft report will be on Zoom Thursday, August 12, 6-7:30 p.m. (Hint: As of August 5, there is no mention of immigrants' needs in the draft report.). Here is the official invitation if you are interested:

"Please join the Ulster County Behavioral Health Task Force to share your ideas on how to build a continuum of care in Ulster County that supports mental health and substance use recovery. You are invited to a Zoom meeting. [Register in advance](#) for this meeting. After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining...."

- **UIDN's WEBSITE** continues to be a storehouse of regularly updated information on community [resources](#) to aid our immigrant friends, [upcoming events](#), and [more](#).
- **LATE BREAKING NEWS?** The UPDATE appears only once a month, but a lot is going on nationally and locally that affects our friends, so be on the lookout for special messages if late breaking events need your attention before our next issue. And, as always...

Thanks for Reading