

The Health and Strength of Our Communities Depend on All of Us

An open letter to elected officials responding to COVID-19

March 20, 2020

Communities in Tennessee and across the country are in the midst of an unprecedented and rapidly evolving crisis, one that began as a public health crisis but has quickly become an economic one. While so much about this moment remains unknown - how long it will last, how deep its impact will be, and how we'll recover - one thing has become clear: **the health and strength of our communities depends on all of us.** We are only as healthy and safe as the most vulnerable members of our community. We need each other.

The nearly 350,000 immigrants and refugees who call Tennessee home are deeply rooted in the fabric of our communities and are working on the frontlines of this crisis. We are taking care of Tennesseans as doctors, nurses, and as caregivers for children and elders. We are cleaning buildings, growing and serving our food, and running businesses that employ tens of thousands of Tennesseans. For more information about immigrants and refugees in Tennessee see below.

This moment requires bold and robust action to protect public health and support working families and our economy. We're calling on you to ensure that immigrants and refugees, of all statuses, are fully included in the decisions you make about public health and economic relief. No matter where we're from or how we got here, we all need to have access to testing and treatment and to resources and information to care for our families. **The only way we'll make it through this crisis is if the measures you take protect all of us, including immigrants. We can start by implementing the following recommendations:**

Provide full and equitable access to health care for all:

- An estimated 121,000 Tennesseans are undocumented and 1/3 of all immigrants in Tennessee lack health insurance. **We must provide COVID-19 testing, treatment, and services for all Tennesseans, free of charge and regardless of immigration status.**
- Immigrant communities have come to fear government agencies and places that are meant to keep them safe. **Government agencies and health institutions must strengthen and publicize policies to reassure immigrants that accessing care and services won't result in immigration consequences.** Governor Lee should suspend Tennessee's Anti-Sanctuary City Law, Public Chapter 973, to ensure local governments can provide these reassurances to all residents without fear of penalties.
- Many of our family members are being held in local jails and immigrant detention centers, where they are unsafe and lack adequate care. **We must release people being detained on civil immigration charges in our jails and detention centers. In our criminal justice system, people in pre-trial detention, those convicted of low-level offenses, and older and other vulnerable people who are incarcerated should be released and additional measures taken to ensure the health and safety of incarcerated people and staff.**
- We must **reject racism and xenophobia** which only contribute to a culture of fear and hinders efforts to stop the virus.



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Ensure that information and resources reach all of our communities in the languages we speak:

- Any COVID-19 resources or emergency communications, including any guidance on how to access essential services, such as unemployment assistance, food stamps, cash assistance, must be provided in the multiple languages, based on the primary and emerging languages according to neighborhood demographics.
- All COVID-19 health care services, including hotlines, must be provided with access to interpreters who provide services in person, over the phone or by video. The availability of these language capabilities should be widely advertised and health institutions should provide an "interpretation graphic" to visually inform residents when interpretation/translation is available upon request.
- Your offices should coordinate with immigrant-serving organizations to ensure that critical information is disseminated widely and reaches all communities.

Provide robust economic relief to all working families and small businesses:

- Economic relief measures, including food stamps, rent/housing assistance, unemployment insurance, cash assistance, and paid leave – must be universally accessible regardless of immigration status and without triggering any immigration penalties.
- Eligibility for unemployment should be expanded to ensure that all workers impacted by the economic crisis, regardless of immigration status have access to relief. Non-traditional employees, like independent contractors and domestic workers, should receive emergency cash assistance, regardless of immigration status.
- Issue clear directives and guidance to all businesses to ensure workers on the frontlines are protected and safe, including providing training and equipment. Worker protections must also be enhanced so that workers who are at high risk or who are afraid for a loved one with underlying conditions are not penalized for safeguarding their health or the health of their loved ones.
- Relief for **small businesses must include immigrant owned businesses** and ensure that documentation requirements are relaxed and language assistance provided.
- With so many Tennesseans out of work as a result of this crisis, **there should be a moratorium on evictions and utilities shut-offs** for the duration of the economic crisis.

Enact a moratorium on civil immigration enforcement and protect access to immigration relief:

- Everyone in our community needs to feel safe staying home when they're sick or accessing care. To promote community trust and health, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should **suspend all civil immigration enforcement activity**. And, **local and state governments should suspend all voluntary local collaboration**, including 287g agreements, compliance with administrative warrants or detainers, workplace raids, and any other collaboration related to civil immigration law. **All resources should instead be invested in public health and economic recovery.**

- With the closure of offices and the cancellation of appointments, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) agency must indefinitely extend deadlines associated with immigration applications and automatically extend Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) protections that expire in 2020. USCIS must also delay the proposed fee increases and expand avenues for fee waivers.
- The federal government must withdraw from the DACA case at the Supreme Court. Without DACA, hundreds of thousands of people will lose their work permits, employment and their employer provided health insurance, further exacerbating the economic crisis.
- Government agencies and health care providers must clearly identify that health care, nutrition and other programs responding to COVID-19 as disaster relief to ensure they will not count toward a future public charge determination by USCIS. The public charge rule, which has created immense fear and confusion for immigrant families in need of essential services, must be withdrawn by the federal government.

Immigrants and Refugees in Tennessee:

- > [Nearly 350,000 immigrants and refugees in TN or 5.2% of the state population](#)
- > [13% of children under 18 in TN have at least one immigrant parent](#)
- > [22.7% of immigrants in TN are in service industry](#)
- > [10% of restaurant and food service industry is foreign born](#)
- > [16.3% of immigrants in TN are in the Educational services, and health care and social assistance industry](#)
- > [13.3% of immigrants in TN are in the Arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation, and food services industries](#)
- > [45.1% of immigrants in TN are living below 200% of the poverty line](#)
- > [33.4% of immigrants in TN don't have health insurance](#)
- > [81,810 Tennesseans work at immigrant-owned firms](#)
- > [15.1% foreign born provide services to buildings and dwellings](#)

