Background

Vulnerable communities are still recovering from the disastrous impact of Hurricane Harvey on the greater Houston region. Texans without legal status face particular challenges as many have been unable to access federal disaster assistance, and many already struggle to find housing and employment pre-Harvey. In addition, the current anti-immigrant political climate nationally and in Texas has made recovery from Harvey even more complicated for non-citizens. In response to Harvey, the Collaborative organized several efforts, including identifying gaps in resources for immigrants and refugees and collaborating with partners to determine the best way to fill those gaps. Through that work, the need for direct monetary assistance for those who don’t qualify for federal relief to support lost wages, housing, transportation, medical costs, etc. became a top priority matter. The Collaborative is offering one-time grants for Harvey relief to immigration organizations that may not have access to other funding sources to support their clients.

The Collaborative established a pass-through fund (HILSC Harvey Assistance for Immigrants) to provide Harvey recovery support to immigrants and refugees, and particularly undocumented individuals. The Harvey Assistance for Immigrants Fund was supported by: Houston Endowment, JPB Foundation, Walton Family Foundation, Kaiser Family Foundation, David & Lucile Packard Foundation, The Grove Foundation, and Simmons Foundation.

Grants were made through a light-touch application process to organizations who met the Collaborative’s standards of quality of services. Funding could be used for direct assistance for clients who are ineligible for other forms of relief as well as assistance for the staff of immigration organizations. Seven organizations received grants for services ranging from emergency services and housing repairs to legal services and worker compensation for lost wages due to wage theft.

Grantee Organizations:

These organizations met several key selection criteria:

- Were providing Harvey related services outside Harris County;
- Had waitlists of immigrant clients in need of direct assistance;
- Could ensure that support would be distributed to those who do not have access to government forms of disaster relief or, due to fear of immigration enforcement, chose not to apply for government programs for which they qualified; and
- Are deeply rooted in the immigrant communities and that already have trust and relationships with families still trying to recover.

In total, these organizations received $200,000, with a maximum of 10% per grant for overhead and administrative costs.
Impact Overview – Direct Services

Organizations reported that the types of assistance they anticipated giving to families through this funding was exactly what their clients needed, but several noted that clients had more intersectional needs than they anticipated. Those organizations distributed more funding per person/family than originally planned.

Total Clients Served:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of undocumented individuals</th>
<th># mixed-status families</th>
<th>Total # individuals receiving assistance</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>221</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>325</td>
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<tr>
<th>Type of Assistance Provided</th>
<th>Amount Spent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home Repairs &amp; Living Expenses (flood damage, furniture &amp; appliances, utility bills)</td>
<td>$90,026.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worker Compensation for Lost Wages</td>
<td>$27,993.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency/Crisis Assistance (temporary housing, groceries)</td>
<td>$24,907.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Fees (attorney retainer, court fees to cover USCIS filing fees)</td>
<td>$24,780.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Mental Health Trainings &amp; Self-Care Activities</td>
<td>$16,076.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transportation (driving classes, ride-share services, metro passes)</td>
<td>$3,770.79</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child Care</td>
<td>$2,810.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Expenses (medical bills, mental health services, dental services, medication)</td>
<td>$1,607.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Operating Expenses</td>
<td>$8,029.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Amount</strong></td>
<td><strong>$200,000.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Individuals supported resided in Harris, Fort Bend, Brazoria, Montgomery, and Galveston counties. Individuals assisted were migrants from all over the world, including Afghanistan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Pakistan, Nigeria, Rwanda, Jordan, Palestine, Mexico and Central America.

Trends in Clients Served

We asked grantees to identify and report on various trends they observed as they supported the greater Houston immigrant communities. Below are five groups who face substantial barriers to recovery.

**Mixed-status families**

The deserving and affected families would not often not seek assistance, fearing their information would be either shared or compromised. They believed seeking assistance would render them ineligible for their residency or citizenship due to a misunderstanding of the news coverage and the idea of ‘means testing.’

**Domestic Violence Survivors**

Domestic violence survivors faced increased vulnerabilities as compared to other undocumented individuals. While a client’s immigration status is pending, they commonly find their divorce
proceedings stalled as well. Survivors of domestic violence are left especially vulnerable because they have little to no community or family support. In fact, the social stigma of leaving a marriage leaves survivors shunned in their communities. Continued threats by their abusers leaves them more vulnerable with regards to physical safety and creates a higher risk of being reported to authorities if they try to generate income. Survivors are almost always single mothers fighting for their safety and their children’s safety.

**Low-wage Workers**

Workers who brought Harvey-related wage theft cases to the Worker Center have been unable to recover what they are owed for a number of reasons including the 180-day Texas Workforce Commission statute of limitations, the fact that small independent contractors do not qualify under the Labor Code, and limited access to adequate legal representation. We noticed that, generally, women who worked in cleanup or reconstruction had smaller claims than men, most of whom were independent contractors. This reflected the reality that most immigrant women performing post-Harvey work were making far less than their male counterparts. Our findings in this and other projects illustrate the importance of expanding the infrastructure of legal resources and holistic support for workers to address vulnerability of exploitation in the workplaces as a result of immigration status.

**Families with Disabilities**

Bigger families that have younger children usually need more financial support, and that older children who are expected to provide for themselves from a young age also need more assistance. Additionally, families with special needs children need more funding to support their legal case so that the attorney can secure expert opinion regarding a child’s special needs, even in cases where it is obvious.

**Families with Insecure Housing**

One overarching problem for families comes from complications with real estate transactions, deeds and contracts. Undocumented people survive using a set of strategies that then put them at further disadvantage when disaster strikes. Undocumented or mixed status families enter into damaging real estate contracts because they have few other paths towards securing housing. When this happens, the contracts are not explained to the buyers, are not notarized and neither a title company or real estate agents are not involved. There is a need in the community for an agency or organization to set up processes that enable families to clear titles and to advise people before signing contracts and leases on their homes.
Client Stories

1. One grantee had a client who had a total of six people in her household, including very young toddlers. The trailer had a mold infestation and the smell of mold was dominating. After talking with the head of the household about mold dangers and mold remediation, she asked a question: “Should I spend the cash stipend you gave me to get rid of the mold or to pay a lawyer to help get my husband out of detention?” A few days earlier, her husband had been detained by ICE. She now knew the dangers of mold, especially for the children, but she was conflicted because her husband was the sole worker in the house, and she knew the children needed their father. She wanted to get a lawyer to help with her husband’s case, but she had children that she needed to make sure were living in a healthy and safe environment. The grantee advised her to use the cash stipend in the way she thought best, and told her about organizations that could possibly help her with her husband’s legal situation. It’s a horrible choice to have to make: mold or legal representation.

2. Another family assisted did not qualify for FEMA because the individuals in the home did not have legal residency documents. The family would not seek help from most organizations because they believed their name may end up on a list, which could put them at risk of deportation. Additionally, the mother is illiterate which means even if there was trust she could not understand or fill out applications for relief. From the family’s perspective, help was not available, so they took on the work and expenses themselves. The recovery process took a very long time because the husband worked in construction and his work was not very steady. The wife was working for very low wages and in bad conditions, ending up in the hospital. After leaving the hospital she did not return to work and the family had even less income for their recovery. The agency was only able to learn all this after an extended effort to build trust. Eventually, the agency was able to show the family that it worked differently than other organizations and wasn’t going to require piles of paperwork.

Impact Overview - Staff Mental Health & Self-Care

In addition to the direct client services, funding was available to support “self care” for staff of immigrant-serving organizations who suffer from secondary trauma, burnout, and fatigue. The Alliance, uniquely, used their grant to support the establishment of a permanent “Self Care Corner” to support the wellness of its incredibly hardworking staff, most of whom are still helping Harvey-impacted immigrant and refugee families recover.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of Staff Served</th>
<th>Types of Self-Care Activities</th>
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<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td>Monthly Self-Care Activities; All-Day Staff Retreats; Monthly Support Groups; Chiropractor and Acupuncture Services; Jung Center Workshops; Time Off; Mental Health Counseling/Support; Medical Assistance for Chronic Illness Support; establishment of a permanent “Self-Care Corner” at The Alliance.</td>
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Examples of monthly self-care activities at The Alliance included: a Vietnamese coffee-making workshop, flower arranging, labyrinth meditation, and planting an herb garden. Activities were led by a staff member to reinforce staff participation. The monthly activities on average saw an attendance of 20-30 people; each activity was intentioned to be different from each other in order to cater to the different interests of staff. Many staff members took an active interest in leading their own events and sharing their knowledge of meditative or self-care practices with their colleagues. These activities were also meant to encourage staff to try new things that they may not have been exposed to before.

The group counseling sessions focused largely on coping and managing trauma, stress, and anxiety in the workplace and were led by Dr. Jeffrey Kottler, a renowned psychotherapist, teacher, and author. His sessions focus on the mental health side of self-care. Dr. Kottler’s sessions averaged about 20-25 people and his sessions typically had the same consistent staff members in attendance. While the monthly activities were meant to be fun and relaxing events for the staff, Dr. Kottler’s sessions dealt more with the serious issues that arise from working in a helping profession. They provided staff with tools to manage burnout, compassion fatigue, trauma, and difficult work-life balance along with an opportunity to discuss their issues freely in a safe space.

Reflections on the impact of the structure of these grants

“The HILSC funding was perfectly structured for maximum impact. Clients did not have to complete overwhelming paperwork or bring in documents that, as survivors fleeing violence, they may not have access to.” – Al-Noor Society of Greater Houston

“We appreciate the unique opportunity to use these funds to practice resilience and community-care. We often teach our worker leaders to care for themselves to avoid burn out, but we rarely get the resources necessary to practice what we preach as staff.” – Fe y Justicia Worker Center

“Funding from HILSC has proven to be crucial for helping many of our cases move forward. Hurricane Harvey financially crippled many of our clients’ families, who are already living paycheck-to-paycheck. With HILSC’s support, we were able to file more appeals, avoid the risk of more appeals being denied, and fulfill our commitment to our child clients.” – Kids in Need of Defense

“This funding allowed us to respond rapidly to the needs of our communities. Many times, we were able to respond with aid the same day. This is so powerful when responding. When folks are hurting and hungry, not making them wait is very important. Having these funds available allows us to provide aid so folks don’t have their electricity shut off. This is huge.” – Living Hope Wheelchair Association

“It was incredibly helpful to have access to funds that could be spent outside of our main zip codes in Northeast Houston.” – West Street Recovery
Conclusion

Overall, these grants are a drop in the bucket, of course. There remain thousands of families who are nowhere close to “whole” and who continue to face impossible choices, like the mother choosing between protecting a family member from deportation and living in a clean, safe home. Funders should be thinking about creating immigrant resiliency and supporting mixed-status families post-disaster because these individuals are disproportionally impacted, and less likely to have access to financial support. We recommend that private funders:

1. Provide private funding to organizations that are deeply rooted in immigrant communities, are trusted, and have a track record of serving immigrants.

2. Get educated about what the barriers are to immigrant recovery and do everything you can do break those down for your region.

3. Fund culturally competent case management.

4. Provide capacity building to immigrant-serving organizations so they are fully prepared for disaster (e.g. Continuation Of Operations Planning)

5. Fund legal services as part of recovery preparation and response to help families achieve more security through legal status.