

CALLING FOR JUSTICE

COVID-19 recovery committees must support all residents

Our community is in crisis. COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted already marginalized populations, increasing inequity in access to critical resources like food, shelter and healthcare. Systemic disparities make it even harder for many Houstonians to protect themselves against the virus. The COVID-19 recovery committees are responsible for prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable and must commit to building long-term wellbeing for all.

Houston is [home to one of the largest immigrant populations in the country](#), with 1 in 4 people foreign-born, over 500,000 undocumented residents and 32% of children with at least one non-citizen parent. The impact of COVID-19 on the immigrant community is acutely harmful. Existing systems of power are ill-designed to address the needs of immigrants irrespective of their status. This is particularly apparent where their [marginalization intersects](#) with the historic disenfranchisement of communities on the basis of race, gender, class, mobility, etc.

- the recent [Presidential Proclamation](#) substantially limiting legal immigration for at least 60 days as well as the [closure of the U.S./Mexico border](#);
- the exclusion of immigrants from recent federal aid package meant to support families during the pandemic, ignoring the critical contributions of immigrants as [frontline workers](#) in high risk jobs, as [taxpayers](#), and as a critical [part of our workforce](#); and
- the [denial of public assistance](#) to many in times of economic hardship, aggravated by recent changes to “public charge” regulations that have served to punish low-income immigrant families.

The Houston Immigration Legal Services Collaborative (HILSC) condemns all federal actions that weaponize COVID-19 as an opportunity to further advance harmful and discriminatory policies.

We call on all COVID-19 recovery committees and leaders - particularly Harris County Recovery Czar Armando Walle and City of Houston Relief & Recovery Czar Marvin Odum - to implement local policies that address the needs of all community members, irrespective of immigration status.

HILSC SUPPORTS THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Direct Cash Assistance
- Funding Immigration Legal Defense
- Language Access
- Guaranteed Housing
- Internet Access
- ID for All
- Reduced Local Jail Populations
- Testing for All
- Worker Protections
- Mental Health Funding

For additional information please visit www.houstonimmigration.org/covid19recovery.

10 immigrant-friendly policy recommendations

TIME
LINE

DIRECT CASH ASSISTANCE

Immediately establish coordinated relief funds to provide financial support for families at or below 80% of the AMI guidelines that are experiencing significant hardship or loss of household income because of the pandemic. Assistance should be prioritized for families that are made ineligible for other forms of government relief (such as the CARES Act) or are receiving relief that does not meet their needs. Assistance should also be prioritized for individuals with chronic health conditions and mobility limitations. Funding should be distributed through trusted, grassroots, non-profit organizations that have strong existing relationships with immigrant communities. The size and budget of an organization should not be a factor in determining these fund distribution partnerships.

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MOS

FUNDING IMMIGRATION LEGAL DEFENSE

Harris County should allocate substantial financial resources to the [Harris County Legal Defense Fund](#), and the City of Houston should join with the County and contribute financial resources to the fund to extend its reach. Lawyers are critical to ensure that Houstonians are released from immigration detention quickly, in order to reduce the risk that they contract or spread COVID-19. Immigration legal services also put more immigrants on a pathway to legal status, making them eligible for more public health services in the future.

1-6
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LANGUAGE ACCESS

Emergency notifications with public health information must be accessible in at least the top five languages spoken in Harris County and the City of Houston. To reach more communities, City and County offices must partner with local school districts and faith communities – through collaboratives like Houston Responds and others – during an emergency to disseminate critical information to families through their existing communications tools.

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Relationships with trusted non-English media outlets must be strengthened to ensure information is communicated accurately and shared widely. Public agencies must partner with professional, high-quality interpreters and language justice organizations in order to decrease barriers to access for the immigrant community and signal commitment by service providers to caring for our diverse population.

6-12
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GUARANTEED HOUSING

Guaranteed housing is an absolute necessity during this crisis to ensure the health and safety of the community. Harris County and the City of Houston must [institute programs](#) that protect people's ability to stay in their homes through direct rent and mortgage assistance, payment forgiveness programs and extended eviction protection. Housing must also be made available for persons experiencing homelessness and immigrants – particularly children – [recently released from detention](#).

1-6
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Many immigrants have informal housing arrangements and are not afforded the same legal protections as formal lease agreements. These communities need resources and education to ensure their residents both know and exercise their rights. Long-term planning must [prioritize safe and affordable housing](#) of historically black and brown neighborhoods, including immigrant communities.

6-12
MOS

INTERNET ACCESS

The closure of schools and the implementation of social distancing during COVID-19 has deprived low-income populations of access to the internet. The consequences are especially harmful to students unable to participate in online learning. Harris County and the City of Houston must partner with private enterprise to provide free internet access to those in need without a complicated application process.

6-12
MOS

10 immigrant-friendly policy recommendations

TIME
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ID FOR ALL

Create a [photo ID program](#) so that all residents of Harris County and the City of Houston can more easily access essential services with proof of identity and create more efficient processes for emergency assistance programs. Many community members, such as undocumented residents, individuals experiencing homelessness, low-income residents, transgender residents, elderly persons, victims of domestic violence, formerly incarcerated or detained individuals, and other vulnerable populations do not have access to a government ID. All government agencies and officials (including the police) should accept the ID card as a valid form of identification and no personal information kept on file.

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REDUCED LOCAL JAIL POPULATIONS

During this pandemic, incarcerated people are at increased risk of exposure and death. [COVID-19 has entered our local jails](#), infecting inmates and jail employees. Harris County and the City of Houston should work closely with local law enforcement agencies to reduce arrests and expand cite and release programs. Local jail officials should not honor ICE detainers that [violate federal and constitutional law](#).

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TESTING FOR ALL

Free COVID-19 testing must be available for all residents [free of charge](#). Immigration status should not be a deterrent to accessing testing. All persons deprived of their freedom in [correctional facilities](#) and detention centers should also be tested automatically.

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Formally implement tools like HILSC's Immigrant Accessibility Index to help public agencies assess the extent to which their direct client services are accessible to all, regardless of immigration status. Organizational and systemic accessibility includes policies and practices that are trauma-informed, physically and linguistically accessible and created through a lens of cultural humility.

6-12
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WORKER PROTECTIONS

Harris County and the City of Houston should establish effective protections for workers on the frontlines and in high risk jobs during crises. Workers rights organizations have provided [concrete policy suggestions](#) that currently benefit workers in [Austin](#) and [Dallas](#). A robust protection and enforcement process should mandate: access to necessary personal protective equipment (masks, gloves, etc); access to hand washing stations or hand sanitizer and mandatory breaks to sanitize; emergency paid sick leave; hazard pay; and protection against retaliation, wage theft and workplace abuse.

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MENTAL HEALTH FUNDING

Recovery efforts must include supplemental funding to organizations who provide culturally competent, mental health services. The COVID-19 crisis is [exacerbating underlying mental health conditions](#), while simultaneously limiting individual access to already limited mental health services. The isolation of COVID-19 is particularly challenging for many immigrants who have experienced trauma throughout their migration as well as the devastating mental health impacts of detention.

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Our recommendations represent a fabric of meaningful policy changes that, when collectively implemented, safeguard the wellbeing of our community. The public money needed to implement these policies belongs to all of us – and should be used to benefit all residents of our region. The Houston Immigration Legal Services Collaborative offers its expertise and network of partners to the COVID-19 recovery committees and their leadership to help advise on and implement these policies.

For additional information please visit: www.houstonimmigration.org/covid19recovery