

MIRA's agenda for an inclusive response to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic knows no borders, nationalities, race or class. The virus threatens us all, and only together can we mitigate the enormous risk faced by our communities – and weather the social and economic impact of the extreme measures needed to control the virus's spread.

One in six Massachusetts residents is an immigrant. Three in ten children have an immigrant parent. **One in five** workers and business owners is an immigrant – including more than half of medical and life scientists, one in six nurses, and over a third of health care aides.

From hospitals, to grocery stores, to cleaning services, to transportation, immigrants are on the front lines of this crisis, and because they disproportionately have jobs that require physical presence, they will be among the hardest-hit by layoffs and closures.

Those in **lower income brackets** are also very economically insecure – particularly the **173,000–250,000** who are undocumented, and their families. Immigrants with limited English skills will face additional challenges navigating the health care system and accessing the social safety net.

MIRA calls on policy-makers at the federal, state and local levels to ensure that COVID-19 emergency response programs are equitable and inclusive, and pay special attention to the needs of vulnerable populations, including undocumented immigrants and mixed-status families.

ALL people should have access to free COVID-19 testing and treatment. ALL should have access to cash and food assistance programs if they need them. And ALL should be protected by emergency measures aimed at preventing displacement, loss of vital services, and other crises triggered by financial distress.

MIRA also calls on policy-makers to ensure that government does not needlessly exacerbate vulnerability through incarceration, civil immigration enforcement, and policies and statements that sow fear and confusion in immigrant communities.

MIRA supports a broad range of policy interventions to protect public health and to reduce the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. In the sections that follow, we focus on MIRA advocacy priorities at the federal, state and local levels with specific relevance to immigrants:

We urge Congress to:

- Ensure that *all* U.S. residents can obtain free COVID-19 testing and treatment, covered by Emergency Medicaid or a similar program that does not exclude undocumented immigrants or DACA and TPS holders.
- Ensure that emergency assistance to individuals and families that is distributed as tax rebates is provided to *all* taxpayers, including those who use an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN), and that assistance is also provided to those who earn too little to file tax returns.
- Ensure that relief focused on employers gives priority to small businesses and nonprofits, and that it recognizes the diversity of employment arrangements across the economy, so the broadest possible range of workers can benefit.

We call on the Trump administration to:

- Exempt not only COVID-19 testing and treatment, but *all* emergency assistance received during this crisis – including cash and food assistance provided via federal, state or local programs – from the “public charge” test. Make a clear, unambiguous public statement outlining the exemption, preferably in multiple languages, and reiterate prior guidance that unemployment benefits and Emergency Medicaid are also exempt, to address widespread fear and confusion.
- Given the enormous chilling effect of immigration enforcement on our communities, especially at a time of heightened fear, declare a moratorium on ICE civil enforcement operations across Massachusetts and nationwide. We trust our state and local law enforcement agencies to keep us safe, and enforcement of civil immigration law is not a key component to public safety. Given that we urgently need to minimize the number of people held in immigration detention, it makes no sense to make new arrests at this time.
- Release all immigration detainees who cannot reasonably be deemed to pose a public-safety risk – including all those without serious criminal records. Jails should be holding as few people as possible at this time, for the sake of both inmates and staff.
- To the extent that immigrants remain in detention, heed the **advice of public-health experts and advocates** to ensure that detainees’ health and well-being are adequately protected. In some facilities, this will require significant improvements and oversight.
- Largely suspend the operations of immigration courts, and only conduct the most necessary hearings for individuals who remain in detention. Liberally grant continuances upon request, and continue to allow telephonic appearances by counsel, as was authorized by the Boston Immigration Court on March 23, for as long as the COVID-19 crisis continues.
- Automatically extend DACA for all whose coverage would otherwise expire in 2020, recognizing that timely renewals are unlikely to be feasible due to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) office closures. In addition, **TPS holders** whose protections have only been extended pending litigation – almost 12,000 in Massachusetts – should be assured that regardless of the outcome in court, they will not lose their status before January 2021.

We urge the Massachusetts Legislature to:

- Ensure that state COVID-19 response legislation addresses, as broadly as possible, the diverse needs and situations of *all* state residents, including workers in the informal or cash economy, independent contractors, sole proprietors, tipped workers and “gig” workers. Specifically, we urge support for paid leave for furloughed workers, cash assistance for unemployed workers, and access to child care for those who must continue to work. It is also crucial to protect families from eviction and loss of utilities.
- Recognize the critical importance of community-based organizations, **mutual aid groups**, and municipal programs in ensuring that all families’ basic needs are met, and include support for these programs in the COVID-19 response package. We need multiple safety nets so that everyone can get help, even if they are unable to access specific benefits such as unemployment, cash assistance, or food stamps.

We call on the Baker administration to:

- Widely disseminate clear, easy-to-understand information, in multiple languages, to ensure that *all* Massachusetts residents know how to protect themselves from COVID-19, how they can

get tested, and that they can *safely access* free testing and care, regardless of their insurance or immigration status. MIRA recognizes and appreciates the Commonwealth's quick efforts to expand coverage through multiple mechanisms. Now it is crucial to ensure that *everyone* knows that care is available and *how to access it* – especially the most vulnerable populations.

- Ensure that all updates on COVID-19 response measures are translated into multiple languages and disseminated through channels that will reach immigrant communities. This is crucial to ensuring that immigrants know how to protect themselves and can comply with new mandates.
- Enforce state language access plans to ensure that limited-English-proficient residents can access critical services that are now available only online or by phone. This is particularly urgent with regard to unemployment insurance and safety-net benefits, but also extends to the broader range of state agencies as well as the courts. Access in a few widely used languages (e.g. Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese) is not enough to meet community needs.
- Require “essential” businesses and other public- and private-sector employers whose workers cannot practice social distancing to provide adequate protective equipment as well as clear guidance on how to minimize exposure risk, and in collaboration with the Mass. Attorney General's Office, provide a safe, easy-to-access mechanism for workers to report violations.
- Prioritize small “Main Street” businesses for emergency assistance, not only making funds available, but widely disseminating information, in multiple languages, on how to access funds.

We urge local governments to:

- Ensure that information about local COVID-19 response measures and resources is widely disseminated in multiple languages, in collaboration with local nonprofits.
- Ensure that local COVID-19 relief programs, including assistance to families, school-based programs, and support for small businesses, are equitable and inclusive. This means policy-makers should avoid any provisions that needlessly exclude specific groups (e.g. family-run businesses, or undocumented immigrants), and should ensure that information about available relief is widely disseminated in multiple languages, to reach all potential beneficiaries.
- Recognize that many immigrant parents will face particular challenges during the COVID-19 crisis, including lack of child care for those who can't stop working, and the need for additional support to successfully home-school their children. We encourage school officials to follow the **advice provided** by the Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership.