

Testimony of Deborah Axt, Co-Executive Director, Make the Road New York  
before the Joint Hearing of the NYS Senate and NYS Assembly  
on the Disproportionate Impact of COVID-19  
May 18, 2020

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Thank you for allowing me to testify on behalf of Make the Road New York's 25,000 members - black and brown community members living predominantly in epicenter communities, including the epicenter of the epicenter in Queens, New York. Every week we commemorate those among our member leaders that we know we have lost to COVID-19. This week the list surpassed 60. I can only hope to carry their spirit and that of their families to you today.

**Last week Make the Road New York released a report - [Excluded in the Epicenter](#) - based on a study we conducted of over 230 of our members.** The results are horrifying:

- 92% reported that either they or another earner in their household has lost their job or income as a result of the crisis. 84% are now themselves unemployed.
- Only 5% received unemployment benefits in the last month.
- More than half (53%) couldn't pay their April rent and 89% were worried about being able to pay the May rent.
- The majority of respondents are sheltering in place in overcrowded (63%) and unsafe conditions (58%) in their homes.
- Almost two-thirds (65%) rate their remote education experience as fair, poor, or very poor, with close to a quarter (23%) rating their experience as poor or very poor.
- Most face barriers to remote learning due to a lack of necessary devices (42%), internet access (38%), and translation/ language services (37%).

Other data reinforces the results of our report, especially as to the crisis facing immigrant communities. The **Fiscal Policy Institute finds that *most New York City residents employed in essential jobs are immigrants — 54 percent*** of the total. Immigrant workers also predominate in jobs decimated by the crisis. According to [James Parrott of the New School Center for NYC Affairs](#), **nearly one in six New York City jobs lost due to the pandemic was held by an undocumented worker.**

But no matter how many hours they have clocked doing essential work so that others can stay home, nor how hard hit by job displacement **now, undocumented workers cannot get a single penny from the Unemployment Insurance System or the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program.** Many are not even eligible for Food Stamps.

**When our undocumented brothers and sisters lose their jobs or their lives, how exactly do we expect them and their families to stay home and maintain social distance?** While their families run out of food, while their landlords bang on the door demanding the rent that was due April 1 and May 1.

**No \$1200 check is coming. No matter how long they stay on hold with the Department of Labor, no Unemployment check is coming.**

We must continue to push Congress to prioritize families over massive corporations and include everyone regardless of immigration status. **But Albany must take immediate action** to protect immigrants and Black and Brown New Yorkers - the very people most likely to be working essential jobs or to have been left unemployed by this crisis.

**Our communities deserve and need bold action** to ensure a recovery for all. The following priorities are only the absolute emergency interventions necessary to stave off death and homelessness at this time.

## **PROVIDE IMMEDIATE RELIEF TO EXCLUDED WORKERS**

**Undocumented workers, very small immigrant-owned businesses, and immigrant families who have lost a breadwinner to Coronavirus are left without relief,** despite having paid more than their fair share of taxes, and bearing the brunt of the pandemic. **This forces sick people to venture out to work or search for work, putting everyone at risk.**

**We must create a \$3.5 billion Excluded Workers emergency fund, to provide emergency income replacement for excluded workers and immigrants who have lost the family breadwinner to COVID.**

- Begin immediate **weekly or monthly benefits pegged to the amount that a typical low wage worker is eligible to receive now in Unemployment Insurance or PUA** - about \$750 per week - through the end of the crisis.
- **Proof of loss of income must be flexible and include self attestation** to allow those in the informal economy to access relief.
- **The Mark to Market Tax and Worker Bailout would address this need (Senator Jessica Ramos S8277 | Assembly Member Carmen de la Rosa A10414).**

## **CANCEL RENT AND SUSPEND MORTGAGE PAYMENTS**

New York must extend the eviction moratorium for the duration of the emergency plus two extra months after the emergency. The state must also cancel rent for all those impacted by COVID who have lost income, including undocumented households and those in the informal economy. Finally, the state must disallow all forms of rent hikes during this crisis and provide all tenants the right to renew their leases.

Any COVID rent solution must:

- Include renters regardless of immigration status and cover all workers, in both the formal and informal economy. Babysitters, domestic cleaners, and others in the informal economy must be covered and allowed to self-attest income loss.
- In exchange for landlord relief, especially to small landlords struggling in this moment, tenant protections must be tied to that relief. At a minimum, this must include the right for a tenant to renew their lease during this crisis.
- During the period of this crisis, all rent hikes and late fees must be disallowed.

## **DEPOPULATE JAILS AND PRISONS**

The state should **immediately release all aging and vulnerable people in jails, prisons, and detention centers**. The state should also prohibit the use of electronic monitoring or home confinement and rescind all civil and criminal fines related to social distancing.

## **HEALTH CARE**

New York must ensure immigrant healthcare access, as proposed by State Senator Rivera and Assemblymember Gottfried, by allocating **\$532 million to create a state-funded Essential Plan for all New Yorkers with income up to 200% of the federal poverty level**, regardless of their immigration status.

This will include New Yorkers who are currently excluded from health insurance because of their immigration status and those who may lose their insurance if they lose Temporary Protected Status. At the same time, New York should move towards a comprehensive solution, such as the New York Health Act to improve the affordability of health coverage and must sustain the safety net hospitals, like Elmhurst, that have been on the frontlines of saving lives during this pandemic.

## **HOW CAN WE AFFORD IT?**

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We cannot afford to allow this economic and health devastation continue in the epicenter communities of our state. And survival for our people will also equal stimulus for our economy. **It is also worth recognizing, [per The Fiscal Policy Institute](#), that over \$1.4 Billion have been deposited into the unemployment insurance system on behalf of undocumented New York workers** in recent years.

- Federal funding WILL flow to help.
- The **Mark-to-Market Billionaire Wealth Tax** that Ramos and De La Rosa propose would provide around \$5 to \$5.5 billion this year.
- Close the Carried Interest Loophole and pursue all other revenue-generating approaches. The super rich are not in a financial crisis. Working and poor communities are.

**And this is a true emergency** - the State should access the full amount available to it (around \$20 billion) through the **Federal Reserve's Municipal Liquidity Facility**.

Thank you for your commitment to the communities hardest hit by this pandemic. We look forward to working with you to meet these critical needs.