

About

Membership

Annual Meeting

Publications

Cart

Search

Engaging with Worker Relief Funds:

Engaging with Worker Relief Funds: Countering Immigrant Exclusion during the Pandemic

By: Kristin Yarris, Sarah Horton, and Whitney L. Duncan

Introduction

In March of 2021, undocumented workers in New York state held public hunger strikes to call attention to the essential nature of their work during the pandemic and to demand that Governor Cuomo develop a fund to extend financial relief to “left behind workers,” undocumented workers otherwise ineligible for federal or state unemployment relief. These protests, organized by immigrant rights groups like [Make the Road New York](#), were highly visible ways for undocumented workers to emphasize the embodied sacrifices they make through their labor in the U.S. economy, and they resulted in the New York legislature allocating \$2.1 billion to an [Excluded Worker Fund](#). As engaged anthropologists involved with Excluded Worker Funds in our respective states (Oregon and Colorado) since late spring of 2020, the protests in New York—and the national media attention they garnered—caught our attention, especially since the programs we have been working alongside for the past year-plus have received relatively little media or scholarly attention. Our goal in this *SfAA News* piece is to reflect on the policy potential of EWFs as a mode of social care and inclusion for undocumented community members and on the implications of our involvement with these funds as engaged, activist anthropologists.

CARES Act and Policy Exclusions

Throughout the pandemic, undocumented communities in the U.S. have faced extreme barriers to much-needed financial support in the face of job loss, business closures, quarantines, lay-offs and furloughs, and other sequelae of the pandemic. Although undocumented workers often work on the front lines—in “essential” industries such as agriculture, food processing, restaurants and hospitality, healthcare, and domestic service—they are excluded from many government programs for social, health, and economic support. The federal CARES Act, passed on March 27, 2020, excluded undocumented workers—as well as any U.S. citizen or legal immigrant family members listed on their taxes—from government stimulus payments. The [Migration Policy Institute](#) estimates that over 5 million U.S. workers were thereby rendered ineligible for the federal stimulus payments (these exclusions were partly remedied by Congress in December, 2020, with the passage of the pandemic relief package). Undocumented workers across the U.S. have also been excluded from state-administered Unemployment Insurance (UI) payments, even as the CARES Act extended UI to other groups typically ineligible for these benefits—despite the fact that millions of undocumented workers contribute to federal, state, and local tax systems through income and payroll taxes.

State Responses to Policy Exclusions

In the two states where we work—Oregon and Colorado—immigrant advocates, community-based organizations, and (in the Oregon case) allies in state legislatures came together early in the pandemic to address such policy exclusions. In Oregon, the [Oregon Worker Relief \(OWR\) Fund](#) emerged from a coalition of immigrant advocacy groups and philanthropic organizations with the goal of developing a “[massively-scaled human-centered system of mutual aid](#)” that would extend economic relief to undocumented workers experiencing negative economic impacts due to the pandemic and excluded from government systems of care. While initially reliant on private donations to a large philanthropic organization, behind the scenes, advocates were pushing for the support of Governor Kate Brown and the legislature. On April 23, 2020, the Oregon legislature allocated \$10 million to the Worker Relief Fund, an infusion that immediately expanded the project’s scope and impact.

Quickly, community-based organizations had to activate their pipelines for filtering prospective Fund beneficiaries through wait lists and applications systems. The application process for OWR relies on staff of participating CBOs and trained volunteer “navigators,” who assist applicants through the online platform developed for intake and screening. (Kristin got involved in May 2020 as a volunteer OWR navigator with a Eugene-based CBO.) To be eligible to receive the one-time OWR cash payment (which average \$1,200 to mirror federal stimulus checks), applicants are required to show an official form of government photo ID (which can be an identity card or passport from a country of origin) and to verbally attest to economic hardship due to the pandemic (e.g., job loss, income loss, hours reduction, business closure). Other than a photo ID and a verbal statement of economic impact, the only other requirement for OWR is that applicants provide either a mailing address (to receive a paper check) or a PayPal account number (to receive a direct deposit). By mid-May of 2020, the application process up and running, hundreds of Oregonians a week began to receive direct cash assistance, which they could use however they determined.

In Colorado, the “[Left Behind Workers Fund](#)” (LBWF) began issuing \$1000 direct cash payments in April 2020 to immigrants who had lost work due to the pandemic but who were ineligible for CARES Act stimulus payments or unemployment benefits. Like OWR, LBWF began as a philanthropic effort spearheaded by Colorado-based social impact investment firms in partnership with immigrant advocacy organizations. Within a few months, though, municipalities like the City and County of Denver were also contributing to LBWF to help struggling undocumented residents. After a period of resistance, in a December 2020 special session, the Colorado legislature finally voted to allot \$5 million for LBWF (eight months after the OR legislature had made their commitment); in April 2021, the CO legislature voted to contribute \$15 million more.

LBWF direct cash assistance grants have been a lifeline to otherwise excluded immigrant workers. Like OWR, LBWF only asks for basic contact information and for applicants to confirm they were not eligible for stimulus funds or unemployment insurance, and it only requires proof of lost work hours to prove eligibility. In contrast to other forms of public support and emergency assistance, LBWF’s requirements and simple application process communicated a message of goodwill. Moreover, and crucially, these funds have served as a symbolic statement of inclusion and an acknowledgment of their essential place in communities and social economies in our states. Both LBWF and OWR positioned undocumented workers not as objects of charity but as *workers* who sustain the economy during the pandemic, and who are essential and deserving of social care and support.

Engaged Anthropology with Excluded Worker Funds

During my (Kristin’s) time as an OWF navigator, I called 4-6 OWR applicants per week using a Google Voice account set up for this purpose. In these calls, conducted in Spanish, I documented applicants’ responses using the Fund’s online software platform. While initially motivated to get involved as a helper and community volunteer, I soon discovered how valuable my ethnographic interviewing skills were—listening attentively to people’s stories of suffering and hardship and guiding them through difficult conversations to complete intake form requirements. Some people’s responses to the OWR intake questions were brief and succinct, while others talked at length about the hardships they were enduring. I tried to capture the essence of these stories in the intake form’s online spaces, even as doing so often felt insufficient in comparison to the magnitude of suffering and harm. Because I engaged in this work as a volunteer, I do not consider these navigations “research interviews” and would not use individual stories in any identifying way (the case described below is a composite uses a pseudonym), nor do I have an IRB approved for this purpose. As an engaged anthropologist, though, the ethnographic insights I gained as an OWR navigator are important to share, as they powerfully reveal undocumented workers’ struggles during the pandemic. These include job loss, income loss, housing precarities, inability to pay utility and medical bills, social isolation, uncertainty and anxiety and other mental health challenges, and inability to support transnational family members in origin countries. I am still considering what aspects of these ethnographic insights I feel comfortable writing about (beyond this *SfAA News* piece) that will advance the aims of community and policy advocates to foster reforms that are caring and inclusive of undocumented community members.

For Sarah and Whitney’s part, we have been involved with LBWF informally as part of our multi-year National Science Foundation-funded ethnographic research study on the impact of local, state, and federal policies on Latinx immigrants’ well-being. When the pandemic began, our ethnographic engagements necessarily shifted to a hybrid of phone interviews and advocacy work as we sought to link immigrants to resources they desperately needed to keep their families afloat and alive during the pandemic. Whether dropping off food, cleaning supplies, and medicines to participants when they become ill; gathering funds to help with rent; helping them figure out where to get COVID tests, treatment, or vaccines; or helping them apply for emergency rental assistance or cash assistance through LBWF, this experience has enriched our relationships with participants and acted as an opening to more horizontal forms of anthropological knowledge production.

For all of us, this work has thrown into stark relief the material and symbolic effects of longstanding federal policies of exclusion. For instance, many immigrants have been afraid to apply for any form of financial assistance—even programs like OWR and LBWF that were specifically designed for them—due to the so-called “public charge” rule. In February 2020, just before the pandemic struck the United States, the Trump Administration implemented a [restrictive revision of decades-old public charge policy](#)—regarding which public benefits render undocumented immigrants ineligible for adjustment of their legal status. The policy change—which included Medicaid and food stamps as benefits that would count negatively towards a public charge determination—made many undocumented immigrants leery of accepting any public assistance, no matter how hard we worked to explain that the worker relief funds did not count as a “public benefit.” As one Colorado woman put it succinctly, “People say a lot of things and you never know whether it’s true or not, so you just decide not to [apply] to be safe.” The patchwork public-private nature of both the Oregon and Colorado funds made our attempts at assuring recipients that fund payments would not count as “public charge” all the more difficult. [Biden’s Department of Homeland Security ultimately rescinded the Trump Administration’s public charge policy in March, 2021](#). However, the shadow cast by the public charge policy stunted the inclusive potential of worker relief funds by contributing to a climate of fear and mistrust and preventing some otherwise-eligible immigrants from applying.

We shared these and other barriers with fund organizers as we volunteered, navigated, and accompanied immigrant applicants. In Colorado, for instance, Sarah and Whitney advised the LBWF designers to ensure all screeners were equipped to address applicants’ public charge concerns. For LBWF applicants, a requirement to document lost work hours often proved a major obstacle for informally employed immigrants, many of whom are paid in cash. The LBWF founders explained how they had strategically designed the LBWF eligibility criteria to avoid running afoul of a 1996 federal law, the Personal Work Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which [prohibits states and localities from providing means-tested “public benefits” to undocumented immigrants](#). LBWF’s designers remained mindful of this policy landmine and cite it as a reason for requiring proof of lost work rather than an income test for LBWF eligibility. As a result, some of the immigrants who suffered the greatest economic hardship—those who work in the service sector, [which was shuttered during the pandemic’s economic shutdowns](#)—were unable to qualify.

In Oregon, advocates realized within weeks of launching OWR that a parallel fund was needed to support workers quarantined or in isolation due to COVID exposure or infection. The “Quarantine Fund” (Q Fund) had almost the same application process as the Worker Relief Fund, with an additional page of questions asking about COVID exposure and post-exposure healthcare seeking. The Q Fund had a built-in requirement that applicants must have sought healthcare for COVID symptoms to be eligible for benefits. However, it was immediately evident to me (Kristin) that most undocumented immigrants sent home from work during the summer of 2020 had neither access to COVID testing nor to follow-up health services. “Elisa,” for example, was an undocumented Q Fund applicant in her mid-50s who worked for an agricultural contractor on a large industrial blueberry farm. After several co-workers on Elisa’s crew fell ill and tested positive for COVID-19, the contractor told Elisa and her crew to stay home for fourteen days before coming back to work. Elisa did not receive sick pay during this time away from work, so she applied to the Q Fund for assistance to help cover food and rent payments for herself and her two school-aged children. Prompted by the Q Fund application system, I asked Elisa during our navigation interview if she had sought healthcare or a COVID test. Elisa bluntly stated “no.” She explained that she had stayed home during the two weeks of quarantine and had no idea where she might have obtained either COVID testing or health care if she had needed it. Fortunately, she remained asymptomatic and was able to resume work after the two weeks off. After this navigation, Kristin reported back to the CBO staff that the health care access requirement seemed to exclude potential Q Fund recipients who lack health insurance and access to healthcare, as many undocumented immigrants do. Shortly thereafter, system designers remedied this gap by adding a follow-up process to refer applicants to community and public health providers in their respective counties. This example demonstrates that OWR designers were not always aware of the realities facing the undocumented communities they sought to aid. As a result, they sometimes unwittingly reinscribed the very conditions of undeservingness that they were ostensibly attempting to redress.

Excluded Worker Funds: Possibilities and Limitations

Importantly, these funds have demonstrated the potential of immigrant rights groups, advocates, and allies to come together through innovative public-private partnerships to address some of the gaps in federal policies and offer concrete material assistance to undocumented communities in dire need. In Oregon, during the first year of the Worker Relief Fund’s existence, over \$46 million had been disbursed to more than 26,000 individuals. The [OWR annual report](#) from May, 2021 notes that over 80% of beneficiaries had at least one child and nearly 90% had experienced more than five weeks of economic hardship. As of July 2021, the Colorado LBWF has partnered with more than 40 CBOs throughout the state for outreach and screening and has distributed over \$15 million in direct cash grants to individuals and families. LBWF founders estimate that they have supported households with 21,000 children. This is a significant impact—providing much-needed cash assistance, which individuals used to pay rent and utilities (including wi-fi services, so essential during remote schooling), buy groceries, and otherwise survive the economic hardship of the pandemic. Furthermore, as a state-level innovation, Worker Relief Funds show how state governments, working with immigrant rights groups, can craft inclusionary policies to foster economic and social support for undocumented communities.

Of course, one-time cash grants are no substitute for enduring public policy that supports workers and their families. The Colorado LBWF was designed with policy change in mind: one objective from the beginning was improving public sector understanding of and accountability for the challenges undocumented workers face. In helping persuade the Colorado Legislature to dedicate funds for undocumented immigrants, the LBWF demonstrated that such aid is politically feasible. Moreover, Fund organizers in both states have used the recent success of these programs to win support for even more inclusive policy reforms. For instance, in CO, advocates [built momentum towards a statewide wage replacement program for unemployed undocumented immigrants](#). In OR, the recently-completed legislative session included a number of pro-immigrant policies, including “[Cover all People](#),” which expands the state’s Medicaid program to all residents, regardless of immigration status. Both of these policy proposals built on the coalitional momentum of the worker relief funds to enact first-in-the-nation inclusive reforms. In [forcing states and localities to innovate new mechanisms](#) to include immigrant workers excluded by federal policy, then, the pandemic may have paved the way for creative policy solutions that endure long after the present public health emergency.

At a symbolic level, funds like OWR and LBWF—designed explicitly to address longstanding exclusions and to acknowledge immigrants’ contributions and rights to social care—have for many immigrants acted as a powerful assertion of deservingness and belonging. For us as applied anthropologists, this kind of engaged work—what we have variously described as “[research-cum-social work](#),” “[accompaniment](#),” and solidarity—is an essential complement to fieldwork-as-research. We see these everyday forms of alignment with the immigrant communities with whom we work as ethically incumbent for us as anthropologists of im/migration. Furthermore, this type of engagement is useful as a diagnostic tool, providing important insights into the policy and institutional levels of exclusion that perpetuate systemic violence against im/migrants. Just as Worker Relief Funds have led to innovations in public policy, the pandemic has pushed us to consider novel forms of research and engagement. Navigation, accompaniment, and advocacy during the pandemic has pointed to new possibilities for applied anthropologists to stand in solidarity alongside immigrants and their allies working towards greater social, political, and economic inclusion and belonging.

About
Awards & Prizes
Resources
Contact
Donate
Privacy Policy
SfAA Global



Privacy Policy | Legal Disclaimer

Membership
Join/Renew
Address Change Form
Committees & Topical Interest Groups (TIG)
Nominations & Elections
Online Community
Immigration Initiative
Institutional Membership

Annual Meeting
Registration
Meeting Instructions
Abstract Information
Hotel & Travel Information
Distinguished Lectures
Exhibitor Information
Awards & Prizes
Workshops
Previous Annual Meetings
Future Annual Meeting Sites
Podcast Project
Meeting Agenda

Publications
News
Human Organization
Practicing Anthropology
Online Journals
Other Publications
Advertising
Oral History Project
Rewards of Being a Journal/Newsletter Editor Webinar