



***Unemployment Bridge Program Testimony  
Labor and Workforce Development Hearing  
March 1, 2023***

My name is Jessica Bravo and I'm a Support Services Coordinator at New Immigrant Community Empowerment, a New York City based community organization which focuses on supporting undocumented immigrants and day laborers. We are located in Jackson Heights, Queens, one of the most diverse communities in the city. We serve over 15,000 members. Most of our members are undocumented day laborers, immigrant and low wage workers who work in construction, service sector and informal jobs.

We want to thank the members of the Labor and Workforce Development Committee. We are grateful for the opportunity to shed light on the challenges that unprotected workers face due to not having access to unemployment compensation.

We are here to testify in support of the Unemployment Bridge Program in this year's New York State budget, which would provide unemployment coverage to 750,000 workers excluded from traditional insurance with 30,000 people expected to get benefits at any given time. This includes undocumented workers, low-income New Yorkers - freelancers, self-employed workers, people released from prison or immigrant detention, and those in the cash economy. Senator Jessica Ramos has re-introduced this bill - S3192 - to create this program and Assemblymember Karines Reyes carries it in the Assembly.

The ongoing immigration and COVID-19 crisis have made it clear that excluded workers can no longer afford subjecting themselves to risky jobs in order to make ends meet. The status quo is unsustainable.

Our community members have exposed themselves to great risk during the pandemic, accepting below the market wages, facing discrimination, and wage theft. You have now an opportunity to end the injustice that unprotected workers face due to the precarization of labor and lack of access to unemployment compensation.

When most of the world shut down due to COVID-19, one of the industries that first re-opened was the construction and the service sector. Our community members became even more vulnerable to disease and low wages because they had no other option available to keep themselves safe. Most of our community members could not find a job after the Pandemic hit. Many of our 15,000 plus community members were excluded from relief initiatives such as the

CARES Act and expanded unemployment compensation, and came to our organization in desperate need of jobs, food, and housing. A Hamilton Project study demonstrated that by 2022 economic recovery had once again excluded COVID-19 sensitive industries such as restaurants, cleaning services, and other industries where most of our members rely to secure jobs.

Our community members continue to depend solely on their daily labor. Undocumented workers risk homelessness and hunger if they do not work. This forces them to take unsafe jobs, with hazardous conditions, for less than the minimum by law. While community organizations such as our own have been able to support members in times of crisis, this model of job precarity and uncertainty is not sustainable for millions of undocumented, self-employed and freelance workers among others.

One of our members, we will call her A to protect her identity, had to endure sexual harassment, job-related injuries, low-wages and discrimination working during the pandemic because she had no access to unemployment insurance. This is why this program needs to be included in this year's budget. Having access to unemployment compensation would mean a difference between life and death for many of our community members.

If our community members had had access to unemployment compensation, they would be able to live a more healthy, empowered, and dignified life in their quest for more stable employment. None of the hundreds of immigrant workers we serve on a daily basis in our Workers Center wants to lose their jobs or government handouts. They simply want to be able to not risk death in order to get income. They want to contribute to the health of New York State's economy, but they cannot do so if they face labor precarity, lack of training opportunities, or are exposed to negligence in their workplace, wage theft, discrimination, and occupational risks. The precarity that our undocumented workers experience entails vulnerability for all New York workers.

Moving forward, access to unemployment compensation would allow our members to not lose housing and food and continue to seek sustainable jobs. They would be able to get trained in construction skills and get OSHA and SST certification. Overall their mental and physical health better-paying and more stable employment. They would be able to provide for their families. They would not have to be forced to choose between life and death in order to eat and put a roof over their heads.

The Immigration Research Initiative has [found](#) that 73% of the New Yorkers who would benefit from the Unemployment Bridge Program are non-white, compared to 27% who are white. Black and brown workers are disproportionately impacted by unemployment with for example Black unemployment rates typically running nearly twice as high as the rate for white..

While we continue on the path to New York's full recovery, we urge the state legislature to invest in social safety net programs that prepare us, safeguard our communities, and sustain our economy.

We manifest our sense of urgency to support the Unemployment Bridge Program, increase Workforce Development opportunities to support undocumented workers and day laborers and strengthen workers protections for all workers regardless of their immigration status or type of employment.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to submit this testimony.