

# Community Provides

UNDOCUMENTED COMMUNITIES  
IN WASHINGTON STATE  
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC





## ABOUT US

Washington Dream Coalition (WDC) is a network of undocumented and formerly undocumented professionals of color. Our mission is to address inequities and obstacles faced by undocumented immigrants in Washington State through community-based organizing, education, and advocacy. WDC has traditionally focused on supporting undocumented students accessing higher education, training the educators that serve them, hosting know-your-rights trainings, advocating for state and national policy change, and administering Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) renewal fee scholarships. During the COVID-19 pandemic, WDC shifted its efforts to fundraising and administering funds for undocumented people in Washington State. For this project, we have created a team of seven young professionals of color who work in multiple sectors and bring a series of expertise, both lived and professional, to make this project successful as well as community-led and centered.

 [www.washingtondreamcoalition.org](http://www.washingtondreamcoalition.org)



**WASHINGTON**  
**DREAM**  
COALITION

## INTRODUCTION

Immediately when COVID-19 hit communities, Washington Dream Coalition (WDC) organizers witnessed firsthand how our families were financially impacted by the rise in layoffs and unemployment rates, as businesses rapidly closed. In response, WDC shifted from education support services to disaster relief for undocumented individuals. On March 27, 2020, WDC created the ***COVID-19 Relief Fund for Undocumented Individuals in Washington State***, in partnership with Scholarship Junkies, Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, and the Washington Immigrant Solidarity Network. Within six months, we successfully raised more than \$7.1 million, supporting more than 6,000 undocumented individuals facing financial hardship during the pandemic. This is the largest grassroots-led, volunteer-run undocumented-specific fund in the United States to date. The fund was uniquely positioned in the undocumented community because of the trust and authentic relationships WDC has with undocumented people in Washington State due to our extensive work over the years. As a result of the fund's application process, we collected extensive demographic and geographic data, as well as limited qualitative data, on undocumented individuals in Washington State.

Throughout the six months that our application was open, we received over 19,000 applications from undocumented individuals across Washington State requesting a collective \$18.5 million in aid. Most families needed funding to pay for rent, food security, and medical needs related to contracting COVID-19. Undocumented immigrants in Washington (and in the majority of the country) are unable to access unemployment and health insurance. In addition, the federal stimulus package prohibits any household with an undocumented member on their tax refund from

receiving a stimulus check. In our state, 109,000 U.S.-born citizen children (7% of Washington's K-12 students) have undocumented parents, according to the Migration Policy Institute. Therefore, we knew that the COVID-19 pandemic was going to leave our community—our parents, siblings, relatives, and loved ones—in precarious working environments or without access to jobs, as well as without healthcare access. Our undocumented community was already being oppressed through racism, sexism, classism, and xenophobia through the fear of detention and deportation and being denied access to basic human rights. The pandemic has shown us how our systems are inherently inequitable.

The nationally-provided data for our state and county are limited, but WDC has unique sources of data through our localized approach. We learned that out of all our 19,000 undocumented applicants, 95% lost wages, 94% are renters, 5.9% are houseless, 20.1% are pregnant or have a child under 3 years of age, 5.6% are LGBTQIA, 74% are single parents or the primary income in their household, 30.5% are high risk defined by CDC guidelines, and 83% primarily speak a language other than English. In addition to this quantitative data, this past year, we have designed and implemented a process to hear stories from community members that deepen the data.

The WDC's COVID-19 Relief Fund for Undocumented Individuals in Washington State paved the way for government-funded relief, including the Seattle COVID-19 Disaster Relief Fund for Immigrants and the Washington COVID-19 Immigrant Relief Fund. Over 400 community organizations worked together to push for the latter, a state-funded program modeled after the WDC's success.

This community effort secured \$62.6 million in relief aid. Now, we need more systemic change. We need more than one-time bandaid support to undocumented individuals; we need long-term solutions. We are in a critical time to advocate for systems-level change, in multiple sectors, for and alongside undocumented immigrants and communities of color. As one of our recipients said:

“We want everyone to be aware that we are all contributing to our state, to the country, and the economy. We count too!”





# UNDOCUMENTED WASHINGTONIANS

## *Prioritizing Undocumented Communities as an Approach to Equity*

According to the “Profile of the Unauthorized Population: Washington” by Migration Policy Institute, Washington State is home to 229,000 undocumented immigrants (of which 75,000 live in King County). Of those, 46% are below the 200% Federal Poverty Level and 46% are uninsured. However, we believe that these numbers are underreported and unrepresentative. Similarly, we do not have access to data on how many undocumented immigrants have tested positive for COVID-19 resulting in hospitalization or death, due to immigration status privacy in the healthcare system. However, we know that 63% of the undocumented population in our state are of Latin American decent, which represent 27.8% of the COVID-19 positive cases, 10.9% of hospitalizations, and 8.7% of deaths; 25% are of Asian decent, which represent 10.7% of the COVID-19 positive cases, 12% of hospitalizations, and 13.5% of deaths; and 3% are of Black and African decent, which represent 13% of the COVID-19 positive cases, 9.7% of hospitalizations, and 6.3% of deaths (Migration Policy Institute and King County Race and Ethnicity Data Dashboard, 2020). These groups have been disproportionately affected in COVID-19 cases resulting in hospitalization and death, connecting the specific intersection between racial disparities and undocumented immigration status.

Undocumented people without access to work permits like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) or Temporary Protected Status (TPS) are often unable to get access to living-wage jobs because of their lack of a work permit and minimal access to meaningful public education. Instead, undocumented people are actively exploited into risking their lives every day during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the active climate crises across the country, in the name of “keeping our economy moving,” which is upholding the system of capitalism in the country. Through our fund, we have had the opportunity to support many kitchen workers in our local restaurants, caretakers of the elders and children in our various communities, farm workers who collect the food we are able to eat everyday, cleaners of the offices we work at, and workers who are maintaining our hospitals and public spaces during this crisis. We know that many of these families will lose, or have lost, their jobs and will find themselves unable to sustain their families and pay for fundamental human rights like housing, health, and food, leading to unsustaining well-being and livelihood.

... undocumented people are actively exploited into risking their lives every day during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the active climate crises across the country, in the name of “keeping our economy moving,” which is upholding the system of capitalism in the country.



## OUR STORIES

To better understand the immediate needs, supports, and obstacles faced by our undocumented and communities of color during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Washington Dream Coalition developed a research and storytelling process. As organizers, we hear directly from individuals how our systems have inequitable and inadequate support in place and we hear their demands for longer-term state-wide efforts that center equity and economic justice. We created a mixed-methods community participatory research project with the goal of co-creating community-driven recommendations for advocacy efforts and legislation centered on the needs of the undocumented community in Washington State. From this process, we now have powerful qualitative data via virtual listening sessions.

Through the spring and summer of 2021, we held focus groups and interviews with 34 fund applicants to better understand their experiences. These conversations deepen the data we already have from the fund applications. The stories that we heard and held were full of hardship, grief, and vulnerability—but they were also full of wisdom and care. In the following pages, we share themes pulled from these stories, coded by trained qualitative researchers, as well as the voices of those who were directly impacted.

# 78,275

*Washington COVID-19  
Immigrant Relief Fund 2020*

# 4,820

*Seattle COVID-19 Disaster  
Relief Fund for Immigrants*

# 19,078

*WDC's COVID-19 Relief Fund  
for Undocumented Individuals*

# 13,735

*Washington COVID-19 Immigrant  
Relief Fund 2020 Recertification*

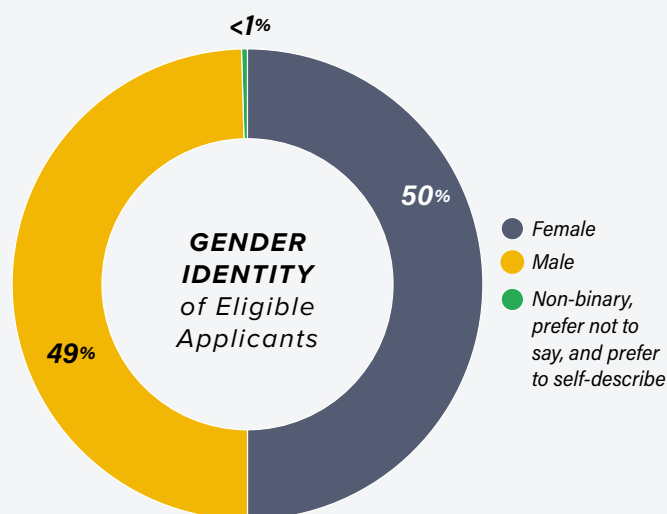
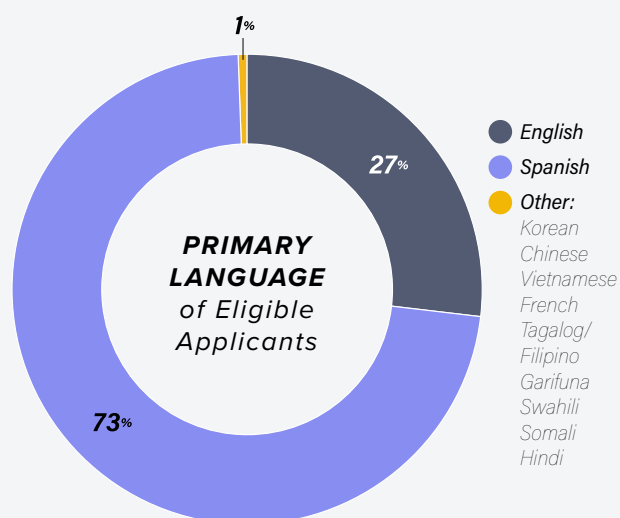
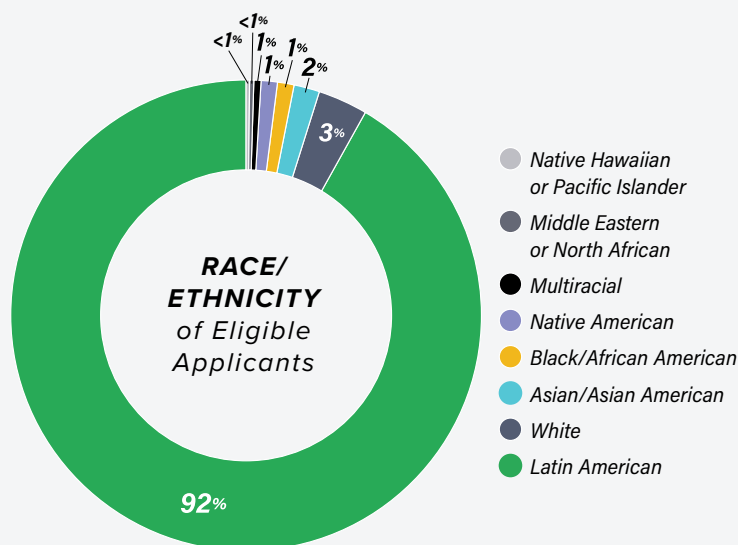
# 64,947

*Washington COVID-19  
Immigrant Relief Fund 2021*

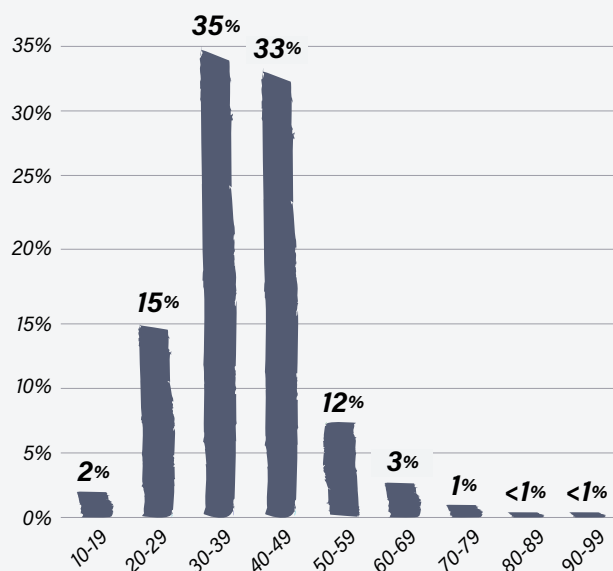


# WHO ARE THE FUND APPLICANTS?

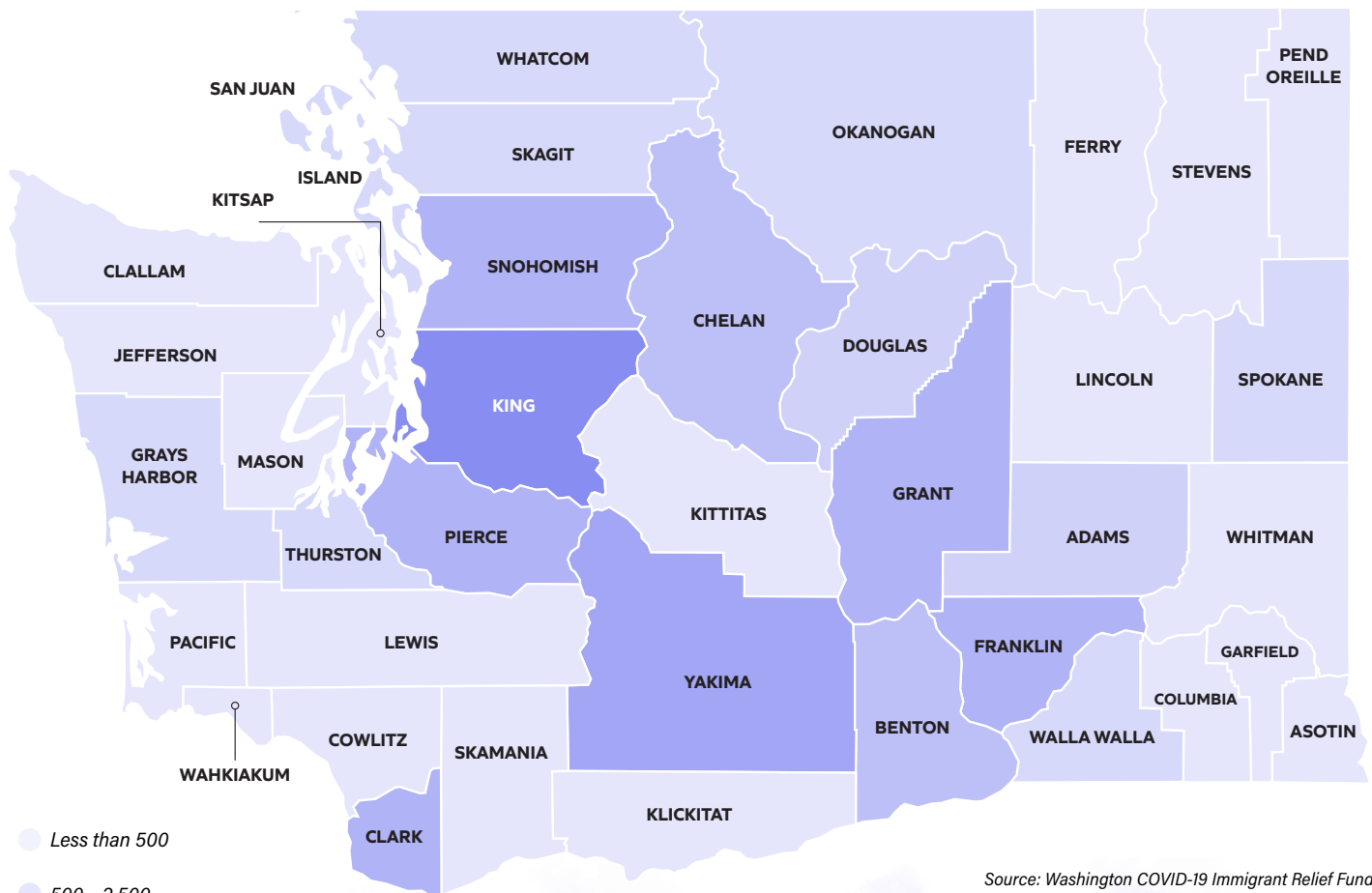
These demographics include all eligible applicants to the Washington State Immigrant Relief Fund—residents of Washington State who are not eligible for unemployment benefits. Thus, this is a snapshot of community need, and not fully representative of all undocumented immigrants in the state. In total, there were 78,275 eligible applicants. Most applicants reside in King County (20,599) and Yakima County (12,027). The vast majority of these individuals, 87%, lost income when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and 50% of them were at high risk for contracting and/or contracted the virus.



**AGE of Eligible Applicants**



## WHERE IN WASHINGTON DO ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS RESIDE? BY COUNTY



“We are very happy and thankful to know that there are people who care about us. We have two children in the home, whose school life has been interrupted. I was so worried about paying rent, that we haven’t been able to support them with their school work. Now, with this support, I feel like my children, my wife, and I can breathe.”



## STORIES & COVID-19 EXPERIENCES

How has our undocumented communities experienced the COVID-19 pandemic? How do experiences vary by individual circumstances?

### 1 Lack of assistance with basic needs

Lack of assistance with accessing basic needs such as PPE and COVID-19 tests, school supplies, housing and rental assistance, jobs, and unemployment supports.

*Well, I think it would be ideal that we all would have access to housing without having any worries, because if we do not pay rent they are going to kick us out from where we are living. The food, having food, knowing that we will have a way to feed ourselves."*

### 2 Mental well-being and reduced personal or family stress (individual stress and isolation)

Specific to individuals and family experiences around stress, mental health, grief, loss, and isolation.

*It affected us economically, emotionally, and educationally."*

*My husband works in construction and has lost his job because of the pandemic. I am six months pregnant with two other children and this is so stressful."*

### 3 Staying connected to community for emotional well-being

Community supporting each other to survive this pandemic.

*I try to give the information to my co-workers and tell them to share it with their neighbors, their family members, right? Because that is what we need right now, to unify as an immigrant community."*

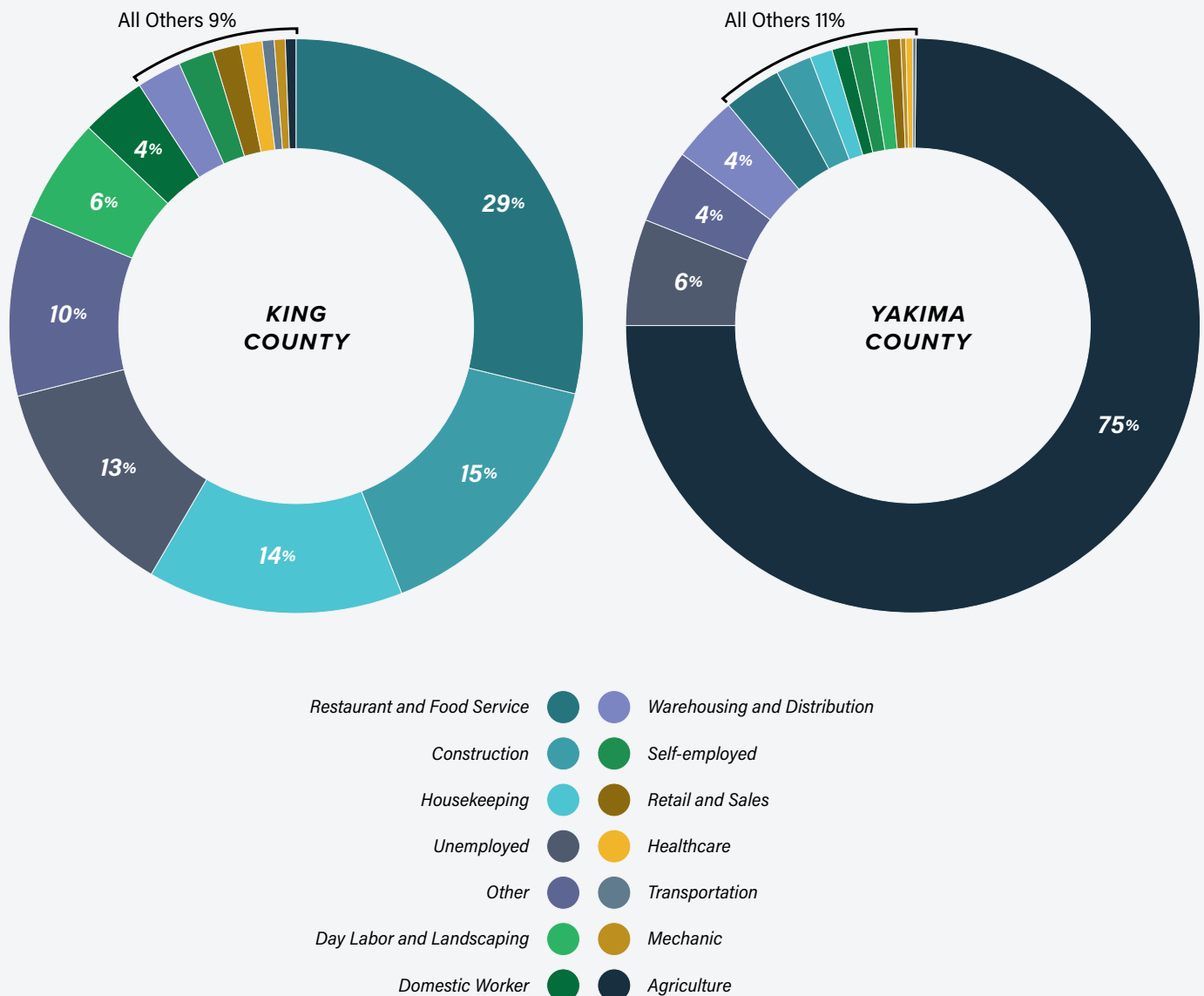
*We have united and made this help and support groups, not only for the food, but also psychological support. Well, from now on it is remote, but different support groups have been implemented."*



Across the state, there were individual and regional differences in how applicants experienced the COVID-19 pandemic. The top two job sectors reported by applicants were agriculture (27,222) and restaurant and food service (11,753). Breaking it down geographically, there were distinct sets of job sectors. In more urban and suburban areas like King County, the top reported sectors were restaurant and food service and construction. In more rural areas like Yakima County, the top reported sector by far was agriculture. While this data highlights different regional considerations, what remains the same is that throughout the state, there has been a failure to fully protect those who work to feed us, sustain us, and build our communities.

## HOW DO LOCAL JOB INDUSTRIES COMPARE ACROSS THE STATE?

Percent of Eligible Applicants by Job Sector in King and Yakima County



## INEQUITY IN REGIONAL RESPONSE

How have systemic regional responses to the pandemic impacted the ways undocumented communities navigated the COVID-19 pandemic to meet their basic needs? What types of short-term assistance are most impactful?

### 1 More help from government needed

Government assistance mentioned as most important or necessary for families and communities during the pandemic. Assistance such as flexibility with banks, mortgage payments, rent, and other supports so that the burden does not fall on other family members.

*"The ones have their social security have gotten their stimulus checks and well not us, because we do not have a social security. We do not receive anything."*

### 2 Remove barriers & responsive local organizations

Simplify access to basic needs supports and programs. Also mentioned how responsive local organizations were in helping individuals navigate resources and supports.

*"These organizations helped us and helped me a lot, my family. Honestly I thank these organizations a lot because they took us into account."*

*"Honestly, it is very beautiful. It feels nice. Even though we are undocumented here, to have support like that is well received and it feels beautiful."*

### 3 Access to health insurance and information

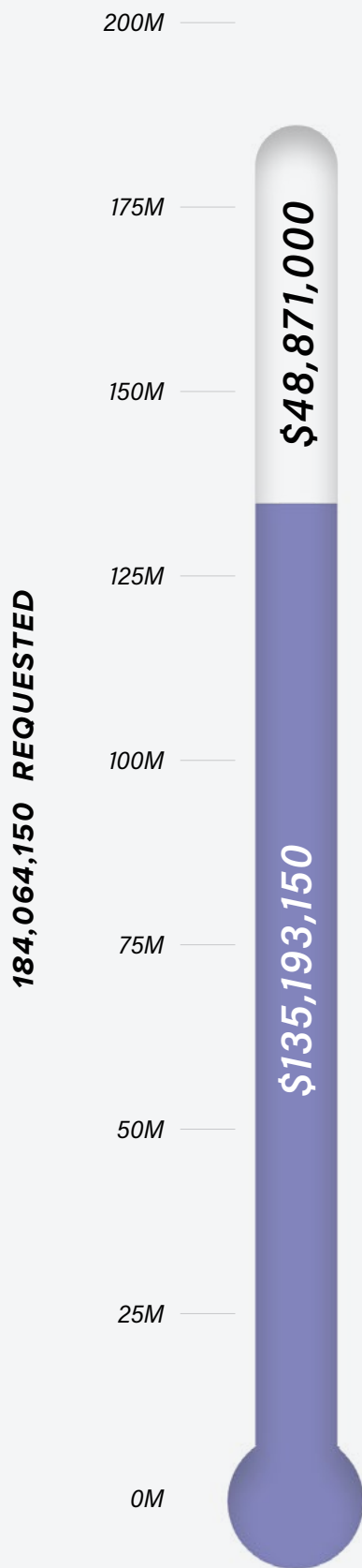
Having health insurance to reduce the burden of health costs, continuing much needed health care, and clear information on health practices and vaccination.

*"Sometimes we don't want to go to the hospital because we are scared of the bill we will get."*

*"It's much easier if you count with insurance because [if] I am sick I would go [to the doctor] because I know my insurance would cover me."*



## Cumulative Unmet Need Across All Funds



### Seattle COVID-19 Disaster Relief Fund for Immigrants



### WDC's COVID-19 Relief Fund for Undocumented Individuals



### Washington COVID-19 Immigrant Relief Fund 2020



### Washington COVID-19 Immigrant Relief Fund 2020 Recertification



### Washington COVID-19 Immigrant Relief Fund 2021



# TRANSFORMATIVE SYSTEMS CHANGE

## What types of long-term systemic changes are most needed?

### 1 Permanent supports that promote long-term stability for undocumented immigrants and families

Resources to further undocumented immigrants' lives, such as access to formal jobs, easier pathways to citizenship, affordable college education, affordable and stable housing.

*The ideal world for me would be one in which I have unemployment [insurance]. More than anything because... the situation in the fields, comes winter and everyone starts to struggle."*

*The challenges are already very big and they did not necessarily come about because of the pandemic, they already existed."*

### 2 Able to seek medical care without fearing the cost

Individuals shared how having stimulus money, unemployment benefits, and insurance would reduce barriers when needing medical care.

*Ideally, we all would have medical insurance. That is, knowing that if I get sick I do not have to worry [about paying] the bills that I get of thousands and thousands of dollars."*

### 3 Ongoing mental well-being supports to reduce personal or family stress

Access to stimulus money, unemployment benefits, and health insurance would improve family morale and reduce stress.

*If I received cash assistance, it would make a big difference. It will help me and my family too. We are so behind on things. It would be a lot helpful to get cash assistance. The difference will be getting on top of everything. Hopefully it'll get better and get back to the way it was."*

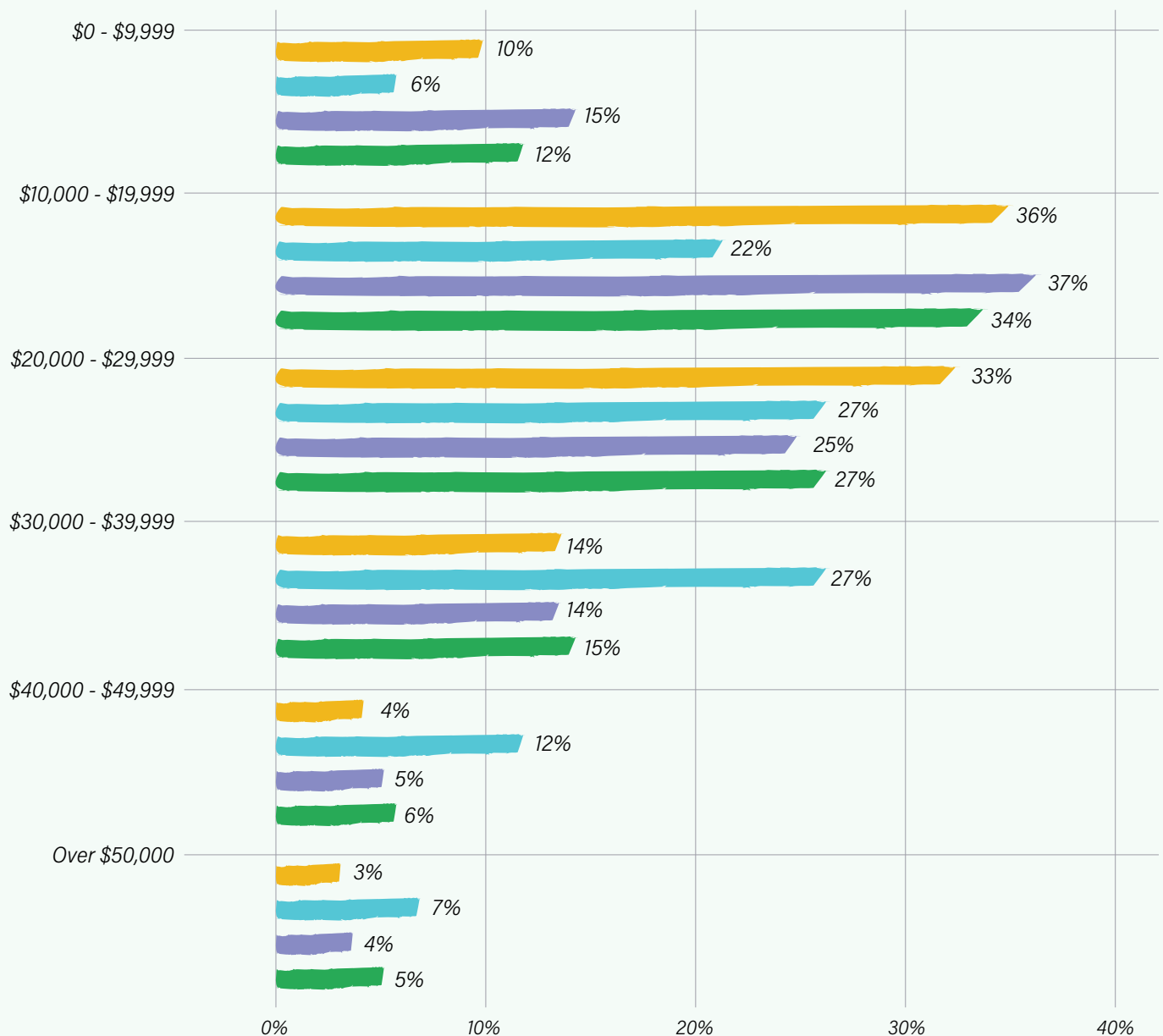
*My life would become easier if I had simple things like healthcare. I refrain from going to the hospital due to not having healthcare. In the United States there seems to be so much bureaucracy even for the doctor. It isn't like Korea where if you need something, there are resources to provide quick assistance and get you to where you need to be. There would be less worry with unemployment as well. The pandemic is still here and I never know how it will affect [my] business. It is worrisome to think that I do not have access to unemployment benefits and no other resource."*



## ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOMES BY JOB SECTOR

In Washington State, the living wage for an adult with no children is \$33,982 and for a family of two adults and two children, it is \$90,141 (MIT Living Wage Calculator). Most households of eligible applicants make under this living wage threshold.

- Agriculture
- Construction
- Restaurant and Food Service
- All Job Sectors



## COMMUNITY CARE & RESPONSE

In what ways have undocumented communities come together during this unprecedented time to provide support to one another?

### 1 Staying connected to community for emotional well-being

Community supporting each other to survive this pandemic.

*I am the gossipier of the warehouse in terms of help. Well, to my neighbors and the people I know, I try to give them all the information about supports."*

*My family is very far away. I have some church friends that call and check on me. They've been very helpful and try to encourage [me]. That's a huge support for me."*

### 2 Community-based organization resources and support

Shared how specific community-based organizations provided basic needs supports and resources.

*[Organizations] help us get out of the hardships that we sometimes have, because even if the help is small, I think it is a lot for the one who needs it."*

*I bless you all for the time you are taking to fundraise funds for us, since we have been forgotten by the government. I am a COVID-19 survivor. People like you and my daughter, who is a nurse, are why we are surviving this pandemic."*

### 3 Job security and family safety

Experiences related to lack of job security during the pandemic and importance of COVID-19 protections in the workplace such as having PPE, social distancing, access to testing, and vaccinations to protect self and families.

*It was during the time when unfortunately field work is scarce, in the month of October after the harvests, what's basically October, November, December are months that are hard to work because there's not much work, you work very little because of the weather or cold. You struggle a lot and thank God for this organization that I was able to receive help."*

*Well I would go to work, go to work scared and like that, like that I would be the whole time."*



# ANA'S STORY

When the United States talks about undocumented immigrants in this country, they usually tend to focus on two things: what they "take," and how fast can we get them out? Not many people are willing to see past a status into the daily lives of actual hard working and contributing families. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, my family and I felt invisible. The government was giving speeches about stimulus checks we knew we didn't qualify for. The Department of Unemployment was encouraging all of its working citizens to apply. We saw the rest of the country obtain benefits we knew we deserved to have as well. We were considered essential workers. We served the community. We put in the time and effort. Yet, we were left in the dark. The Washington Dream Coalition's fund was a helping hand we did not expect to find. There were actual concerned, determined, and infuriated people who were fighting for us not to get left in the dust. Up until that moment, I wasn't as aware or involved in the efforts of my community to raise undocumented immigrant voices. This fund was not just a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic, but of

decades of this community's striving to be seen as contributing, hardworking, and deserving.

The Washington Dream Coalition's fund was the set-up for the community care and change we need in order for the immigrant community to continue to be seen. We do not need short-term solutions or temporary plans, but rather permanent and promising legislative action. The hours we punch in, the food we serve and pick, the taxes we pay, and the constant labor we continue to provide should all be the true markers for the seat we need in this country, not our immigration status. My hope is that the amount of applicants and the money raised from the Washington Dream Coalition's fund can be seen by the government as a door to change.

There is a whole community in the United States that has adapted and completely taken in a life and country that makes it a point to drive us away. It is time they know they need to see us and that we are here to stay.

It is time they know they  
need to see us and that  
we are here to stay.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

ONE

## **UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE**

Unemployment insurance has been a key safety net program that has kept working families afloat during the pandemic. While undocumented immigrants have always needed access to such a program, this need was further highlighted by the pandemic. Such a program would need to avoid public charge implications, be administered in a way that protects the data of undocumented individuals and shields it from information sharing with the federal government, be accessible to diverse undocumented communities, and be administered by state governments. Benefits should be provided in a weekly or biweekly amount and be available for up to 26 weeks during regular times or more as comparable to benefits available to those with an immigration status that can access traditional unemployment insurance.

TWO

## **HEALTHCARE INSURANCE**

Research has long show that undocumented immigrants too often forgo preventative care and access medical care for costly life saving treatment, if at all, when their health is deteriorated. The pandemic further exposed the health inequities these communities faced. Far too many community members were afraid of getting tested as health providers erroneously billed them for free tests. States and local governments have the opportunity to implement a health program subsidized or fully funded by said jurisdictions that can provide healthcare access to individuals not able to purchase healthcare through the marketplace.



### ***CASH ASSISTANCE WITHOUT RESTRICTIONS***

Our focus groups and survey responses demonstrate that targeted programs (i.e. rental relief programs) were often too high-barrier to be accessed by undocumented workers and too constraining to provide substantial relief. Undocumented workers best understand their own lived reality, their budget, and how assistance can be best used. Programs that were targeted for a specific use required substantial documentation/relationships with landlords, etc. that our community members did not have access to. When individuals were provided with no-strings-attached assistance, they were able to piece together the limited programs available to them (i.e. food banks) to cut down on their regular costs and assess how their remaining money could be best used. This fluctuated from rent one month, to medicinal costs another month, to food costs another month; further highlighting the importance of flexibility.

### ***LISTEN TO COMMUNITY***

Undocumented individuals face a reality distinct from any other. As such, any program designed to benefit this community should be co-created with undocumented stakeholders to ensure it will actually be accessible and helpful to said community. Options available to ensure this are focus groups, a steering committee that oversees implementation of new programs and includes/prioritizes undocumented individuals, and ongoing public engagement.

THREE  
FOUR

# OUR FUTURES

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened the already heavy hardships of the undocumented community. It also spotlighted the power of community care. When we, as undocumented organizers and allies, stepped up to create supports for those who were left out, we saw how our systems can be reimagined and transformed.

We urge policymakers and advocates to remember that while it is true and important that undocumented immigrants are essential workers, taxpayers, and contributors to the economy—your support should not be about production, but about humanity and community. Undocumented immigrants are neighbors, friends, family, and fellow community members. We need the government to step it up to protect all of us.





# THANK YOU

## MANY PEOPLE HELPED MAKE THIS REPORT POSSIBLE.

Thank you to **Communities of Opportunity** for funding the creation of this report; **Scholar Fund** and Brian Chu for the quantitative data support; Romina Murguia, Anthony Reza, Jose Manuel Quiñonez Figueroa, and Lance Allen for the qualitative coding of focus groups; Para los Niños, White Center Community Development Association, Pacific Islander Community Association, India Association of Western Washington, and Amigos de Seattle for focus group recruitment support; Cecilia Vizcaino, Tulika Dugar, Kunjan Kapoor, Mario Godoy, Gabriela Ewing, April Kim for interview and focus group facilitation support; **Rommy Torrico** for the beautiful illustrations, and **Studio T Designs, LLC** for the great graphic design of this report; and the thousands of undocumented Washingtonians whose voices were vital to these pages and our ongoing work.

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“

Thank you for so much  
for doing this. You will  
never know how much  
hope you provide.

”