

COVID-19 and its impact the immigrant community by Ade Adebajo

Immigration is a constant topic of conversation in America from taxes to employment to education and healthcare benefits, there have been many debates about what the rights of the immigrant population are.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought issues concerning health care, labor laws and food insecurity to the forefront.

One of the biggest concerns for immigrant families during this pandemic is that students are not going to school and therefore are not eating lunch, said Javier Luengo-Garrido, coordinator of the ACLU of Massachusetts' Immigrant Protection Project.

“It’s important for families to know that the Springfield Public Schools are offering lunch to students under the age of 18 who are public school students,” he said. “Other communities have similar programs.”

The programs are expected to continue throughout the summer.

Another issue facing immigrant employees who often work jobs in the restaurant and agricultural industries which have been heavily impacted by the pandemic, is whether undocumented workers have the same rights as citizens.

“It does not matter if a person is documented or not, people are still protected by labor laws. If any immigrant worker feels as if they are being obligated to work in an unsafe situation, they should contact the state’s Labor Department and make a claim. Everyone is protected by those laws,” Luengo-Gallardo said.

According to the National Immigration Law Center the House of Representatives introduced the “Take Responsibility for Workers and Families Act” which would ensure that “uninsured individuals regardless of their immigration status, would be covered for COVID-19-related services.”

Last year in Springfield the Welcoming Community Trust Ordinance was passed which stipulates that no one who works for a city department can ask a person about their immigration status since this information is not relevant, Luengo Gallardo explained.

“If they do run into a situation where someone from the city or police department questions them, then I would urge them to contact us so that we could rectify that situation. I would urge people to always feel comfortable contacting police for help regardless of the situation and their status,” he said.

Luengo-Gallardo said immigrants who show symptoms of COVID-19 and do not have health insurance still have the right to receive treatment.

He mentioned La Cliniquita in the Brightwood section of Springfield as well as the High Street and Mason Square locations, a mobile healthcare vehicle which caters to the immigrant population, especially migrant workers.

“Hospitals are obligated to treat anyone regardless of whether they have health insurance or not,” he said.

The Law Center’s policy brief highlights the CARES Act which “allows states to use their Medicaid programs to provide free testing to uninsured persons.” This means anyone can be tested regardless of their circumstance.

As for fear of deportation or those who are already detained Luengo-Gallardo said his agency and many others are requesting U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to cease any detentions and raids and for people who are in their custody and have severe health problems to be released.

“The ACLU is currently dealing with two severe cases including one person who is a terminally ill cancer patient. ICE does not have the conditions to keep them safe. It’s important to note that these people are not being detained for crimes they are detained for civil infractions,” he said. “People who are detained cannot practice social distancing. They sleep and eat in the same place and share bathrooms. ICE does not have the conditions necessary to keep people safe and healthy, especially those who are at high risk of contracting the virus.”