

NATIONAL DOMESTIC WORKERS ALLIANCE

Testimony of

**Haeyoung Yoon
Senior Policy Director
National Domestic Workers Alliance**

A Hearing on

Immigrants as Essential Workers During COVID-19

**Before U.S. House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship**

September 23, 2020

Introduction

Chairwoman Lofgren, Ranking Member Buck, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about immigrant essential workers across many sectors of our economy, workers who have kept us safe and kept our economy running in the midst of a global pandemic.

My name is Haeyoung Yoon, and I am the Senior Policy Director at the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA). Founded in 2007, the National Domestic Workers Alliance represents 2.2 million domestic workers who work as nannies, home care workers, and house cleaners in private homes, providing essential care and supportive services to our children, aging adults, and loved ones with disabilities every day. NDWA reaches and engages over 250,000 domestic workers on a regular basis through our 60 affiliate organizations in 36 cities and 17 states, our local chapters in Atlanta, Durham, Seattle, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and New York City, and our digital platforms. Domestic workers are overwhelmingly women, well over half are women of color, and more than a third are immigrants.¹ As of 2019, domestic workers are more likely than other workers to have been born outside the United States; one in five domestic workers is a foreign-born noncitizen.²

COVID-19, Essential Workers, and Immigrant Essential Workers

The unprecedented economic and public health crisis of COVID-19 has revealed what many of us knew long before this pandemic: that our economy -- in times of stability and in crisis -- is powered by workers, and that essential workers span many sectors and industries across the economy. As our country became the epicenter of the global pandemic, the first essential workers we recognized were doctors and nurses on the frontlines of treating people with the virus. It quickly became clear that there are many other essential workers, largely in low-paid service jobs, overrepresented by immigrants³, and disproportionately women and women of color⁴ who take care of us in many different ways.

These essential workers are farmworkers who grow and pick the food we eat; they are delivery workers who ensure that food, cleaning products, and other basic necessities during this pandemic are delivered on time; they are retail workers who stock grocery and pharmacy shelves with food and medicine for families; they are home care workers who care for and provide support to aging adults and people with disabilities in daily activities like bathing and

¹ Wolfe, J., Kandra, J., & Shierholz, H. (May 2020). *Domestic Workers Chartbook*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/domestic-workers-chartbook-a-comprehensive-look-at-the-demographics-wages-benefits-and-poverty-rates-of-the-professionals-who-care-for-our-family-members-and-clean-our-homes/>.

² Id.

³ Peri, G. & Wiltshire, J. (2020). *The Role of Immigrants as Essential Workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Global Migration Center. <https://globalmigration.ucdavis.edu/role-immigrants-essential-workers-during-covid-19-pandemic>

⁴ Robertson, C. & Gebeloff, R. (2020, April 19). How Millions of Women Became the Most Essential Workers in America. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/us/coronavirus-women-essential-workers.html>

eating; and they are child care workers and nannies who provide child care to other essential workers on the frontlines of COVID response. It took a pandemic for our nation to recognize that these workers are essential. They are the critical engine of our economy. From grocery store workers to nurses, from home care workers to janitors, from warehouse workers to farmworkers, their work is essential, and it *always* has been.

While their labor makes our lives possible, essential workers have been largely invisible, marginalized, and undervalued. Too many essential workers are sorely underpaid, without benefits and job security, largely unprotected by our social safety nets, and lack voice in workplaces. For undocumented essential workers, lack of immigration status makes them even more vulnerable to violations of their rights, including unlawful retaliation, wage theft, and hazardous working conditions. Studies have shown that foreign-born workers who lack work authorization are far more likely to experience wage-and-hour violations, and women workers without work authorization experience the highest rates of these violations.⁵ Now, in the midst of the pandemic, essential workers are risking their lives every single day -- their safety and health, and that of their families -- for us. Despite this, many immigrant essential workers and their families have been excluded from much needed economic and other federal COVID relief, including cash payments, nutrition assistance, and/or COVID testing and treatment, even though they have been on the frontlines of the pandemic.

Essential Care Workforce

During the pandemic, domestic workers have been bearing the responsibility of taking care of our aging parents, children, loved ones with chronic illness and disabilities, and homes. At the same time, they have faced enormous hardship sustaining and caring for themselves and their families. While many domestic workers are primary breadwinners for their households,⁶ they are paid low wages, often do not have savings to fall back on, do not have paid family and medical leave or paid sick days, and lack health insurance. All domestic workers typically earn \$12 per hour,⁷ and home care workers typically earn \$16,200 annually.⁸ Thus, this pandemic

⁵ Cooper, J. & Kroeger, T. (May 10, 2017). *Employers Steal Billions from Workers' Paycheck Each Year*, Economic Policy Institute, <https://www.epi.org/publication/employers-steal-billions-from-workers-paychecks-each-year/>; National Employment Law Project (August 2011), *Workplace Violations, Immigration Status, Gender: Summary of Findings from the 2008 Unregulated Work Survey*, https://s27147.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Fact_Sheet_Workplace_Violations_Immigration_Gender.pdf

⁶ Since March 13, 2020, NDWA has been conducting weekly surveys of domestic workers through our online news services. Our surveys in March and early April showed that 77 percent of over 15,000 surveyed workers are primary breadwinners of their households. NDWA, *Coronavirus' Economic Impact on Domestic Workers*, https://domesticworkers.org/sites/default/files/Coronavirus_Report_4_8_20.pdf

⁷ Wolfe, J., Kandra, J. & Shierholz, H. (May 2020). *Domestic Workers Chartbook*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/domestic-workers-chartbook-a-comprehensive-look-at-the-demographics-wages-benefits-and-poverty-rates-of-the-professionals-who-care-for-our-family-members-and-clean-our-homes/>.

⁸(2019). *U.S. Home Care Workers Key Facts*. PHI. <https://phinational.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/US-Home-Care-Workers-2019-PHI.pdf>.

has also been *a crisis of impossible choices* for domestic workers. Without a safety net, domestic workers have no choice but to go to work or risk eviction and the threat of not feeding their families. For months, many workers went without personal protective equipment (PPE) or child care for their own children and did not receive an increase in pay.

Here are some accounts of how immigrant domestic workers have been caring for us during COVID-19:

- Kieran is an immigrant caregiver in New York City who cares for an elderly woman with dementia. Kieran provides total care for her patient, from bathing to brushing her teeth to feeding her three times a day. She often works long shifts with multiple overnights where she is the only person caring for her client. At the beginning of the pandemic, Kieran took public transportation to and from work, but she worried that she would be exposed to the virus and put her own health and the health of her client at risk. Now she takes taxis or Ubers to and from work even though she lives paycheck to paycheck. She also doesn't have paid sick time. She lost a colleague and a former colleague to the virus and is grieving those losses while trying to keep herself and her client safe. The strain is taking a toll on her because even though she spends her days caring for her client who depends on her for everything, she doesn't feel that people are taking care of her.
- Maggie is an immigrant from Poland and a domestic worker in Chicago who has been doing house cleaning and caregiving work for more than 20 years. Before the pandemic, her main job was to clean homes for about 20 families, and she earned around \$2,000-\$2,500 a month. Last December, she also accepted a caregiving job for a family for whom she cleaned regularly because the family trusted her to care for their parents. In March, as shelter-in-place orders went into effect, Maggie suddenly lost all of her house cleaning jobs, leaving her with only the caregiving job. Her income has been reduced to about \$400 a week, and she is accumulating credit card debt because she needs cash on hand for emergencies and groceries. She has to bring her 12-year old son to her caregiving job for an elderly client because she doesn't have anyone to take care of him. She has recently gained a few house cleaning clients.
- Sandra has worked as a house cleaner and a nanny for the past 20 years. She lives in Queens in New York City, which was the epicenter of the virus outbreak in New York. She works four days a week as a nanny for two children and has to take the train to work. She covers herself as much as she can because she knows that trains are a high-risk area, but she needs to keep working to pay for rent and food. Because she is

undocumented, she feels even more invisible and vulnerable. She has paid taxes all the years she has been working, but is excluded from any federal assistance during this crisis. Furthermore, she has no health insurance.

- Lee is an immigrant homecare worker in Los Angeles. She has been greatly affected by coronavirus because she is older and knows that she is more at risk of getting seriously ill with the virus. She worries about losing her job because she has no paid sick time but has an 85-year old mother for whom she cares and has children she supports in the Philippines. If she does not work, she does not get paid, which puts them all at risk. Earlier this spring, she was exposed to the virus at the assisted living facility where she cares for a 98-year old woman. The facility did not give her personal protective gear until after the potential exposure. She had to quarantine and move out of her apartment to prevent the potential spread of the virus to her roommates. She eventually tested negative for the virus and was able to return to her apartment.

Domestic workers like Kieran, Lee, Sandra, and Maggie and other essential workers who are profoundly insecure are the ones keeping our families and communities safe. Often, home care workers are the only lifeline to the outside world for some of the people most vulnerable to the virus, such as older Americans and those with chronic illness and disabilities. As many families are grappling with the realities of virtual learning and setting up learning pods, domestic workers are called upon to take on additional responsibilities of supervising and supporting children in distance learning and do so without an increase in pay.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharper focus the need for care, especially for our elders, and the need to invest in building a robust care infrastructure. Even before the pandemic, states across the country were experiencing chronic care worker shortages. The home care sector will need to fill 4.2 million jobs by 2026, creating more new jobs than any other occupation in our economy.⁹ Our country's need for care workers is simply colossal. By one estimate, nearly 20 million adults nationwide need long-term supports and services.¹⁰ In California alone, the number of individuals older than 65 is expected to increase to 9 million by 2030,¹¹ and the state will need to fill over 1.4 million direct care jobs by 2026.¹² Similarly, Texas needs 675,100 direct care workers and Arizona needs 154,700 by 2026 just to meet the needs

⁹Id.

¹⁰ Scales, K. (2020). *It's Time to Care: A Detailed Profile of America's Direct Care Workforce*. PHI. <https://phinational.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Its-Time-to-Care-2020-PHI.pdf>.

¹¹ Thomason, S. & Bernhardt, A. (2017). *California's Home Care Crisis: Raising Wages is Key to the Solution*. UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education. <https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/pdf/2017/Californias-Homecare-Crisis.pdf>

¹²PHI. "Workforce Data Center." Last modified December 17, 2018. <https://phinational.org/policy-research/workforce-data-center/#var=Employment+Projections&states=04,06&tab=State+Data>

of families in those states.¹³ The rising demand for these essential care workers is driven largely by the aging of Baby Boomers. Moreover, as advances in healthcare and technology extend our life expectancy, more of us will need care and supportive services to stay in our homes and communities. Care workers, including immigrant care workers will continue to be essential into the next decade, caring for and ensuring that our aging parents, relatives and friends, along with people with disabilities, live and thrive in their homes and in communities.

The work that care workers, other essential workers, and immigrant essential workers do is heroic, yet they are not treated like heroes. We have a choice to treat all essential workers as heroes by giving them a real shot at economic security and opportunity. That real shot means making many low-paid essential jobs into good jobs by paying higher wages, providing benefits like paid sick days, paid family and medical leave, health insurance, and offering a path to legalization and citizenship. Lack of legal status for immigrant workers hurts all workers -- U.S.-born and foreign-born -- because when employers exploit the lack of immigrant workers' legal status to abuse them, they create a pervasive culture of fear that chills efforts of *all* workers to voice and enforce their rights and to improve their working conditions in the workplace. For this reason, legalization of immigrant workers must be a central pillar of transforming essential workers' jobs into good jobs. This is the American way to rebuild our economy out of this crisis.

Conclusion

The pandemic has laid bare that many sectors of workers in our economy are essential, taking care of us and making our daily lives possible. It is time for the rest of us to start thinking about the needs of essential workers, rather than just expecting them to take care of ours.

Thank you again for the opportunity to offer testimony today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

¹³PHI. "Workforce Data Center." Last modified December 17, 2018. <https://phinational.org/policy-research/workforce-data-center/#var=Employment+Projections&states=04&tab=State+Data>