



March 7, 2022

Dear Governor Parson,

Thank you for the opportunity to be able to address you this afternoon. My name is Rita Chang, and I am a community organizer with the Inter-Faith Committee on Latin America. We are a nonprofit based in St. Louis that is working toward an immigrant-inclusive Missouri. I have been asked to talk about needs of the Hispanic community in St. Louis, so I will discuss these in the context of my experiences.

Immigrant-Inclusive Governmental Programs

Since May 2020, with the Immigrant Service Providers Network (ISPN) and local philanthropic partners, we created a regional fund to support immigrant families who had been excluded from mainstream governmental assistance. When we began receiving requests for assistance, **99% of requests came from Hispanic community members who had lost work hours, wages, and other income as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.** The following month, the Hispanic community again made up approximately 89% of requests. A year later, we sent out a short survey to 1200 individuals in the immigrant community who subscribed to notifications about the fund to get a sense of how the need had shifted. We had nearly an 83% response rate that yielded the following results: 97% reported experiencing income disruption; 98% reported difficulty paying for rent, utilities, and food; and 83% reported not receiving cash assistance of \$500 or more that year. **The pandemic continues to affect all Missourians, and our state has yet to address its impact on immigrant families.**

Over the past two years, with ISPN and Washington University, I supported a collaborative study to understand how COVID-19 was affecting immigrants in the St. Louis region. **Immigrants are a population that is highly invisible in the public data that is collected, in the news coverage, and subsequently, in the support that is provided.** Immigrants were asked what they would want to tell the government about their family's experience or needs related to COVID-19. I would like to share with one particular response that summarizes the experience of several of our community members:

*"We are also part of the community. Even though most of us aren't citizens yet, **we are still Americans** because **we still pay taxes, and we still work.** So whatever opportunities are for Americans who have citizenship, most of the opportunities they are getting are for immigrants too, people like us. **[We ask] not to be left out.** This is a pandemic not only affecting Americans, but affecting everybody, **no matter where you come from, it doesn't matter your race or nationality. Those opportunities should also be provided for communities like mine.**"*

Making sure that systems of support are available to all Missouri residents, regardless of immigration status, has promising benefits to eliminate health disparities in our community.



Nearly 75,000 individuals in Missouri live with at least one undocumented family member,¹ and people who are undocumented make up 23% of the immigrant population in Missouri.² They are essential workers, teachers, hospital workers and more. They are taxpayers, though current policies exclude undocumented residents from being able to obtain unemployment insurance, governmental-sponsored health care coverage, and affordable housing. As our state decides on a budget for the next fiscal year, let us remind ourselves that this public health crisis affects all of us, including immigrants, who are integral members of this community. **Especially as our state remains the home for newly-arrived immigrants from Afghanistan and Ukraine, whose long-term immigration status is uncertain, ensuring that all residents can get the care they need should be the state's priority.**

Tuition Equity

In your State of the State address last month, Governor Parson, you made a public commitment on behalf of the state to improve our higher education system. You affirmed that our state must “recruit and retain talent,” which requires investing in the students. Just today, in your opening address to the Hispanic Leaders Group, you said, “[We need to] make sure high school students know what opportunities they have,” and you shared that 70% of people in our state do not have a college degree. Though all children between the ages of 7 and 17 are required to attend school in our state, for undocumented residents, our state prevents them from staying and earning a college degree.

While average enrollment across Missouri postsecondary institutions has decreased by 10.8% in the last five years,³ **since 2015, the Missouri state budget has included language that prevents undocumented residents from paying the resident rate to attend public colleges and universities or be able to receive publicly-funded scholarships.** Part 2 Section 3.300 of MO 2021 HB 3 declares, “*No funds shall be expended at public institutions of higher education that offer a tuition rate to any student with an unlawful immigration status in the United States that is less than the tuition rate charged to international students.*” Furthermore, section 3.305 denies undocumented high school graduates from receiving publicly-funded scholarships. These provisions also apply to students who are DACA recipients, children who arrived in the U.S. without much recollection or ties to any other country.

Tuition equity has promising benefits for Missouri students and the future of our state, including an increase in our state's spending power by at least \$6.4 million and \$800,000 more from state and local taxes.⁴ Allowing all residents, regardless of immigration status, to be able to pay the resident rate and be eligible for state-funded scholarships makes a big difference. With tuition equity, it becomes

¹ Mathema, Silva. “State-by-State Estimates of the Family Members of Unauthorized Immigrants,” University of Southern California's Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration and the Center for American Progress, March 2017.

² Pew Research Center, “U.S. unauthorized immigration population estimates, 2016,” February 5, 2019.

³ MOST Policy Initiative, Inc. Nov. 2020.

⁴ MOST Policy Initiative, Inc. Nov. 2020.



easier for young people to stay in their home state to get a college degree and contribute their talents to our local economy. Over 20 states have tuition equity policies allowing undocumented residents to pay in-state resident tuition, including Texas and Florida.⁵ The contributions of immigrant students are well-documented by neighboring states, who are aware that an educated and talented workforce benefits the entire state. Why doesn't Missouri?

I ask you, Governor Parson, what would it look like if Missouri invested in all of its residents?

Respectfully,
Rita Chang

⁵ National Immigration Law Center, "Basic Facts about In-State Tuition for Undocumented Immigrant Students," March 2021.