



STRENGTHENING BORDER FAMILIES

Community and Policy Responses to Serving Immigrant Families with Young Children in Doña Ana County, NM

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Overview	2
Data Highlights	3
1. Doña Ana County	3
2. NM Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD)	5
Recommendations	7
1. State Solutions.....	7
2. Community Solutions	10
3. Additional Research	10
Appendices.....	11
A. Research Methods	11
B. Results	12

OVERVIEW

Immigration policies in recent years have been exceptionally punitive, with dire consequences for immigrant and mixed-status families in the U.S., including the daily threat of potential deportation and family separation. Not only have these policies magnified an environment of fear and vulnerability for immigrant families, but they have also erected serious barriers to immigrant access and eligibility for services that are essential for the preservation and promotion of child health and wellbeing. The U.S.-Mexico border area in New Mexico is one of the most impoverished areas of the country, where the experiences of immigrant children and families are compounded by complex border policies and dynamics restricting access to supports. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened this vulnerability in an unprecedented way. Until the recently passed American Rescue Plan Act, COVID-19 relief options, like the March 2020 CARES Act, excluded tax-paying immigrant and mixed-status households from receiving financial assistance¹. Even though COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted many immigrant-dominated industries, many immigrant families are ineligible for unemployment or other public benefits.

This report details the results of a research study conducted in the second half of 2020 in the NM border region which aimed to (1) understand how community and government agency representatives perceive the accessibility and quality of their services for immigrant families with young children amidst this pandemic; (2) identify barriers and facilitators for immigrant families accessing services; and (3) develop community-based policy and practice solutions to improving supports to immigrant families with young children in the NM borderlands and throughout the state.² Researchers interviewed 14 community organization leaders, 5 local government representatives, and 10 state government representatives, including 8 representatives of the NM Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD). Four community agency partners provided referrals to key stakeholders and informed the research process in alignment with a community-based participatory research approach.

¹The December 2020 stimulus package somewhat addressed this gap by enabling citizens in mixed-status households to receive benefits. However, people with individual taxpayer-identification numbers, or "ITINs," were still excluded from receiving benefits. The March 2021 American Rescue Plan Act allowed all individuals with SSNs to receive \$1,400 payments (including children whose parents do not have a SSN), making an additional 2.2 million children in immigrant families eligible for relief.

² This research project is a multiphase, qualitative study that seeks to examine the accessibility and quality of community services for immigrant families with young children in Doña Ana County, New Mexico before and amidst COVID-19, as well as how the CARES Act and other COVID-era policies are impacting the immigrant community. The first phase of the study, whose findings are documented in this report, explored the perspectives of community leaders and government agency representatives on these issues. In the ongoing second phase of the study, researchers have implemented a community-based participatory approach by convening an advisory group of natural community leaders (e.g., teachers, social workers, community organizers, etc.) to assist with co-interpretation of the data and the development of future phases of the project. Future phases will seek to collect data from frontline practitioners who work directly with immigrant families and eventually from immigrant families themselves.

DATA HIGHLIGHTS

This section provides an overview of key highlights from the data, including local level barriers to service receipt, immigrant family needs, and local responses as well as state level challenges and responses from an early childhood lens. The full results are available in Appendix B.

1. Doña Ana County

BARRIERS TO RECEIVING SERVICES

Participants discussed key barriers facing immigrant families in accessing needed services:

- **Fear.** Fear caused by the rhetoric and xenophobic atmosphere of the Trump administration has deterred immigrant and mixed-status families from enrolling in government-based programs. Even with policy changes, it will take a while for immigrants to come out of hiding.
- **Eligibility Issues.** Not qualifying for government-based services and assistance, (i.e., SNAP, Medicaid, housing, childcare assistance, unemployment, and financial stimulus) especially during COVID, has placed disproportionate stress on undocumented and mixed-status families.
- **Language Issues.** While many agencies do provide services and information in Spanish, the presence of language barriers, including a lack of bilingual staff and elected officials, further complicates navigation of already bureaucratic systems for immigrant families.
- **Lack of Information and Misinformation.** Immigrants often lack adequate information about available services for their children and the eligibility criteria. Sometimes service providers themselves lack information or education on how to provide services to immigrant families. Misinformation about COVID-19 infection, testing, and treatment has also been a concern.
- **Lack of Funding & Funding Restrictions.** Inadequate funding and funding restrictions prevent agencies from providing some federally funded services to undocumented families. Some organizations have adapted by raising private funds and utilizing local funding to provide services to immigrants.
- **Policy Barriers.** Stricter immigration policies over the past four years, including the Trump administration's public charge rule, have deterred families from seeking services. Even mixed-status families with eligible citizen children have refrained from applying for benefits for fear of jeopardizing family members' immigration status.
- **Reluctance and Mistrust.** Mistrust of government agencies, which has been magnified by the larger political climate, has created reluctance among immigrant families to seek certain services. Agencies that ask families for minimal personal information, refer them to agencies with good follow through, and provide several services on site are more trusted than others. Families are more likely to seek services from providers that have already built trust with the families.
- **Bias.** State government struggles with promoting their programs to immigrant families with young children because of potential political backlash due to biases about who is and who is not deserving of assistance.
- **Siloed Service Structure.** A lack of a streamlined service structure where immigrant families can receive services in a single location acts as a barrier to adequate service provision. A central, up-to-date service directory is also needed, as existing directories quickly become obsolete and outdated.

- **Unique Border Area Barriers.** Doña Ana County is characterized by unique borderland features, including border checkpoints, ICE and Border Patrol presence, and *colonias*³. The geographic makeup of the region (e.g., rurality, lack of services and infrastructure in *colonias*, concentration of services in Las Cruces) reduce access to and receipt of services among the immigrant community. Border checkpoints and fear of encountering immigration officials (e.g., Border Patrol and ICE) creates physical barriers to families' service-seeking behaviors. The legacy of the "militarized" border community and past immigration raids have had a lasting impact on the immigrant community.
- **Government Office Closures.** With state offices closed, visibility and outreach to the most vulnerable is difficult. For example, the application process for early childhood subsidies takes longer now over the phone and there are technological challenges. State officials speculate that immigrants may not be accessing benefits they are eligible for.
- **COVID Safety Issues.** Limits in childcare facility capacity, closures of Pre-k, and nervousness around sending children to center-based care have made it more difficult in a time of increased need for childcare.

IMMIGRANT FAMILY NEEDS

Community participants highlighted that COVID has simply spotlighted or exacerbated existing needs among immigrant families with respect to:

- Education and access to technology, especially in more rural areas;
- Specialized health and mental health services, specifically those not offered by income-based health clinics, such as Spanish-speaking mental health counselors and therapists that specialize in migrant trauma;
- Language services;
- Legal services and support obtaining identification and other legal documents
- Transportation;
- Income, food, mortgage and rental assistance;
- Workplace safety protections for essential agricultural workers;

Existing Effective Approaches for Engaging Immigrant Families

Participants identified several approaches used to effectively engage immigrant families including:

- **Case management and referrals**, including program navigators to connect families to resources including food, shelter, financial assistance, and other basic needs. Faith-based organizations are especially trusted to provide this service. Many state pre-natal and early childhood programs include this service.
- **Information sharing, education, and outreach** to raise awareness about available services. Outreach occurs via a variety of platforms, including social media, grocery store flyers, case management services, Spanish newspapers, town halls, community information fairs and know your rights presentations. Some local government agencies utilize *promotoras* and also highlighted the importance of word of mouth for reaching out to and serving immigrant families in the community.
- **Interagency collaboration** between local community agencies and government representatives to serve and bring resources to immigrant families.
- **Providing language services**, such as translation, interpretation, hiring bilingual staff, and ensuring information is being dispersed in Spanish and English.
- **Cultivating and leveraging trust** with the immigrant community, particularly through bilingual/bicultural workers, home visiting, and partnering with churches or faith-based programs.
- **Streamlining and centralizing services** to offer a holistic, wrap-around approach that meets clients' immediate, essential needs (e.g., food, water, and shelter) as well as their higher-level needs (e.g., education and employment), and that brings all these needed services together in one location.

³ *Colonias* are specific Housing and Urban Development recognized rural communities within the US-Mexico border region that lack adequate water, sewer, and/or housing and infrastructure, with varying types/level of incorporation into neighboring cities and counties. *Colonias* are commonly populated by immigrants, many of whom are undocumented.

- Childcare for immigrant families, particularly for those that do not qualify for federally funded childcare and who lost childcare during the pandemic.

LOCAL RESPONSES

Despite the unique challenges facing the borderlands, communities have responded with innovative approaches to address the needs of their immigrant families.

Local Government Policy. In recent years, the city and county have implemented policies to promote inclusivity of immigrant and mixed-status families and have leveraged local funding to fill the gaps left by more restrictive federal programs.

Community Agency Practices. Some community agencies have located alternative funding sources to provide services to families regardless of immigration status and have adjusted documentation requirements such that they do not ask families about their immigration status and allow clients to provide alternative forms of identification. Agencies have also used emergency funds and grant funds to assist families in meeting basic needs during COVID.

Advocacy and Community Organizing. Immigrant and immigrant-serving organizations have engaged in community organizing and advocacy with elected officials at the local, state, and national levels to address the inequalities facing the immigrant community and mixed-status families on issues including, infrastructure in the *colonias* (e.g., sewage hookups, electric hookups, flood control, road paving), inhumane treatment of migrant workers and of immigrants at the border, the public charge rule, and inclusion of immigrants in COVID relief.

Las Cruces

- Designated itself as a “welcoming city”, meaning that local law enforcement officers do not collaborate with or act in immigration enforcement capacities.
- Turned away federal funding, such as the Department of Homeland Security’s *Operation Stonegarden* program, which was packaged as a border security program but would require increased coordination between local law enforcement and federal authorities.
- Allowed nonprofits receiving city funds to be exempt from reporting people’s immigration status.

Doña Ana County

- Instituted a resolution that prohibits employees of any department, including the Sheriff, from asking about immigration status.

2. NM Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD)

The new NM Early Childhood Education and Care Department launched on July 1, 2020. The Department’s aim is to create a more cohesive, equitable, and effective early childhood system in New Mexico. During its first year in operation, ECECD officials described making concerted efforts to engage with and listen to communities, acknowledging a need to create solutions that are reflective of families’ self-defined needs and strengthen supports to immigrant communities.

STATE GOVERNMENT CHALLENGES

ECECD agency representatives identified a need to:

- Better understand community barriers to accessing public services, including the array of early childhood services and Medicaid.

- Help immigrant families understand what services they do qualify for (e.g., WIC, FIT, Pre-k, home visiting, Families FIRST pregnancy case management, childcare assistance, food stamps, and housing assistance.)
- Address any biases against immigrants that exist across state agencies in providing services.
- Make sure that any future policy offering financial assistance and Medicaid is inclusive of all immigrants, including undocumented children.

STATE RESPONSE

ECECD representatives described initiatives that directly support children in immigrant families, although efforts are not targeted directly towards immigrants:

- Made economic stimulus funds for early childhood programs available to anyone residing in New Mexico, including immigrants.
- Expanded the number of families eligible for childcare subsidies, including language in regulations clarifying that parent citizenship and residency status does not disqualify children from eligibility as long as children meet eligibility criteria.
- Licensed temporary childcare sites during COVID that are home-based for small groups of children, allowing friends and family to become state-supported childcare sites.
- Resource linkage and program navigation assistance to connect families with other needed kinds of assistance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are recommendations of the Center on Immigration and Child Welfare at New Mexico State University, informed by the perspectives of study participants and by consultation with national partners from Migration Policy Institute and the Center for Law and Social Policy.

1. State Government Solutions

Although many ECECD equity initiatives help children NM wide, including children of immigrants, more specificity is needed to target immigrants for benefits and programming within ECECD and across other state agencies and departments that touch the lives of immigrant children and families (e.g., Children, Youth, and Families Department; Department of Health; Human Services Department; Public Education Department; Department of Workforce Solutions, etc.)

Ensure Language Access. All government agencies and contractors receiving federal funding are required to have a language access plan for service provision in Spanish as well as lower-incidence languages. ECECD as well as contractors should have written, comprehensive, up-to-date language access plans to ensure that communication with parents and children is as seamless as possible. Should individual providers lack resources to implement their own plans, the state could consider negotiating a master language access contract for all providers and contractors with lower pricing and better terms.

Establish a Statewide Immigrant Resource Coordinator. A centralized resource hub for immigrant families was identified as a need in Doña Ana County and across the state. State models for achieving equity access for immigrants range from a full immigrant welcoming center/office to immigrant services coordinators within state agencies. A state-funded immigrant resource coordinator position could be key to de-siloing state agency services and creating a centralized resource and referral source to manage state provided and contracted services for immigrants.

Appoint a Local Equity Access Coordinator. Clear communication and information sharing with frontline staff and contractors should be prioritized to ensure compliance with equity-related requirements (e.g., language access plans) and adequate provision of linguistically

Including Immigrants in COVID Recovery

Participants provided specific recommendations to meet immigrant needs in COVID recovery efforts

- **Economic recovery:** Economic assistance and recovery packages, including unemployment benefits, should be accessible to the undocumented community. Alternatively, private funding should be allocated to provide unemployment to immigrant families if they do not qualify for government-provided assistance.
- **Eligibility:** The federal government should not put restrictions on government funded programs or funding so that families can be served regardless of immigration status.
- **Healthcare:** As many immigrants fear accessing medical care due to their immigration status, families should have access to healthcare regardless of immigration status.
- **Mental health services:** As families are experiencing more mental health issues related to the COVID situation, they should have greater access to mental and behavioral health services and resources, including counselors and other tools to help themselves and their children cope with difficult situations like COVID.
- **Technology:** The state should invest in broadband internet and improve access to technology to ensure families can access needed services and online learning.

and culturally competent services. A local equity access point-person in every county could serve as an effective bridge to working with key state systems and agencies to ensure knowledge and compliance with respect to equity access requirements in service provision, particularly within all the child-focused agencies and systems.

Improve Data Measures. Accurate data collection is required to adequately capture equity-related needs and services. However, many traditional data systems and equity measures do not sufficiently or comprehensively collect data on equity-related issues, especially for immigrant parents and families. More accurate measures should be developed in order to close this data gap and adequately capture the needs and realities of immigrant parents and families. At a minimum, early childhood providers and contractors should track and report data on languages spoken at home for all clients in order to address service inequities and target outreach and intervention with immigrant groups. A new task force or working group within existing state initiatives aimed at improving data systems should be formed to focus specifically on developing and integrating meaningful equity measures into data collection.

Prioritize Targeted Outreach and Education. State agencies play a critical role in disseminating information about changes to federal policy that should allow immigrant families to access more benefits, specifically in the following areas:

- **Public charge rule announcement:** The Department of Homeland Security took steps to reverse the Trump Administration’s 2020 change to the rule and has made clear that the 1999 policy guidance⁴ is now being used to assess public charge, which includes fewer public benefits in the public charge determination. While this is a critical step in reducing the chilling effect created by the Trump rule, families may be fearful of accessing benefits for reasons beyond this rule, and there remains much work to be done to educate about these changes and reach out to immigrant communities to build trust.

- **Sensitive locations and vaccine distribution:** All childcare facilities and health care sites are considered sensitive locations per Department of Homeland Security policy, meaning that immigration enforcement actions cannot be conducted in those locations. COVID vaccination sites now also fall under sensitive locations

Opportunities - The American Rescue Plan

In March 2021, Congress passed the latest COVID recovery and economic stimulus package—the American Rescue Plan Act. Unlike its predecessors, which excluded millions of immigrant families from accessing relief, the American Rescue Plan enables mixed-status immigrant families to receive the economic stimulus payments, making relief available to the previously excluded 2.2 million children in immigrant families, and to 11,000 more children in NM. It also significantly increased and expanded the Child Tax Credit for families with U.S.-citizen and legal immigrant children 17 years and younger.⁵ The American Rescue Plan also includes significantly expanded funding for childcare relief, including \$320,296,135 for New Mexico (\$123,219,275 in expanded childcare assistance and \$197,076,860 in childcare stabilization funds).⁶

⁴ Immigration and Naturalization Service. (1999, May 26). *Field Guidance on Deportability and Inadmissibility on Public Charge Grounds*, 64 Fed. Reg. 28689. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-1999-05-26/pdf/99-13202.pdf>

⁵ U.S. Department of the Treasury. (2021). Fact sheet: The American Rescue Plan will deliver immediate economic relief to families. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/featured-stories/fact-sheet-the-american-rescue-plan-will-deliver-immediate-economic-relief-to-families>

⁶ Gallagher Robbins, K. & Hardy, A. (2021). Childcare relief funding in American Rescue Plan: State-by-state estimates. *Center on Law and Social Policy*. <https://www.clasp.org/publications/fact-sheet/child-care-estimates-american-rescue-plan>

policy. The State should promote dissemination of information released by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Department of Education on sensitive locations to local agencies and community organizations.

- **American Rescue Plan:** Economic Impact Payments (EIP) are now available to 11,000 more children in NM. These are families who are eligible for payments for the first time and will need help on understanding how to access those payments, especially if they haven't filed taxes before. The State must ensure that immigrant families and immigrant providers are supported in accessing the additional \$320 million in childcare relief funds allocated to NM in the American Rescue Plan Act. New proposed state regulations around childcare subsidy eligibility hold promise for supporting immigrant families, but policy changes must be better integrated with local outreach, education and access efforts.

Strategies for Tailoring Outreach and Programming to Immigrants

- **Contract with trusted** immigrant-serving organizations or other trusted community partners to conduct outreach as effective messengers.
- Initial outreach and promotion of state benefits and services could be conducted at **churches**.
- Some communities find that going **door-to-door** after a program has been introduced in a local church is a successful engagement strategy, as trust-building visits to family homes will not come by surprise. A service, once accepted by a family, should begin with a home visit.
- **Consistency** and familiarity are critical—the same people going to churches should be the same ones going to homes.
- Include **information/fact sheets** on public charge in home visits, schools, health services, public assistance offices.
- Target **parent engagement** programs with immigrant families
 - Increase understanding of the value of early childhood programming
 - Combat the perception that outside agencies are coming in and trying to take children away or tell parents that they're parenting wrong
 - Include parent education and literacy in their native language
 - Include a parent navigator to build systems knowledge among parents
 - Begin engagement at childbirth. Some states have packets provided to all new parents at the hospital containing information about services available from 0-3 years old, available in multiple languages.
- Utilize local school districts and head start programs to reach parents of 3–4-year-olds.

Revise Benefits Policy. Eligibility for childcare benefits in NM is based on a child's immigration status—a parents' immigration status is not a disqualifier. To truly reach all children in NM, including those in immigrant families, the state should:

- Advertise childcare subsidies to all children in NM, including targeted outreach to immigrant families and communities.
- Extend state licensing and support of family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care that includes access to support to bring homes up to licensing standards, as many immigrants are not eligible for other government funds to help with home repairs, weatherization, etc.

Leverage Funding. The State can leverage COVID recovery funds to develop equity initiatives targeted towards immigrant families. Even when recovery funds expire, the State could use Title I expansion funding to continue to cover costs of specific early childhood equity initiatives.

2. Community Solutions

Participants across a range of positions and perspectives described a need to create a centralized one-stop service shop for immigrant families across Doña Ana County. Recommendations for such an initiative include:

- Having both a physical and an online presence;
- Being developed by a consortium of providers and run by a local trusted agency, perhaps in collaboration with a university;
- Having a referral network and regularly updated service provider information;
- Being funded by a philanthropic entity or by the state;
- Having a central location or using a spoked model to address issues with traveling across border checkpoints; or having a mobile unit that travels around the county; and
- Being clearly defined and informed by families.

Local county or city government should play a supportive role in funding and institutionalizing a resource and service hub for immigrants in their community. Community service block grants or anti-poverty funds can be leveraged to provide ongoing information and coordinate services for immigrants from within government, such as through the mayor's office, or through developing a contract with a trusted community provider who liaises with local government agencies to engage with immigrant families and ensure that information is updated on an ongoing basis.

3. Additional Research

Participants recommended that data be collected from frontline service providers, including early childhood practitioners, in Doña Ana County and from immigrant parents with young children in the community to identify more specific needs and potential solutions to help increase service access and utilization. The second phase of this study surveying frontline community providers across various service arenas and geographical locations is currently underway.

APPENDIX A

RESEARCH METHODS

Researchers interviewed 14 community organization leaders, 5 local government representatives in Doña Ana County, and 10 state government representatives, including 8 representatives of the NM Early Childhood Education and Care Department. Purposive and snowball sampling was utilized to recruit participants by reaching out to leaders working in early childhood or immigrant-serving community agencies in Doña Ana County, NM, and to local and state government representatives involved in the decision-making and implementation of programs and policies for families in the region. Researchers collaborated with four community agency partners, including: (1) a low-cost immigration legal services provider, (2) an early childhood education and integrated services provider for homeless and near-homeless families, (3) a faith-based community organizing group, and (4) an education and nonprofit capacity-building organization. Leaders of these agencies provided referrals to community stakeholders and helped inform the research process in alignment with a community-based participatory research approach.

A qualitative thematic approach was utilized to analyze data from individual interviews, a focus group with state early childhood representatives, and group meetings with community agency partners using Dedoose qualitative software. An initial codebook was created by two researchers, and was member checked and revised using an iterative team process to arrive at common definitions of codes. All data was double-coded by two researchers.

APPENDIX B

RESULTS

Key themes that emerged from interview and focus group data with respect to the factors impacting immigrant families' access to needed services include: barriers to service receipt, immigrant family needs, and local and state responses to immigrant family needs.

BARRIERS TO SERVICE RECEIPT

Participants reported that immigrant families with young children in Doña Ana County encounter barriers to accessing services due to factors such as fear, eligibility, language access, information, funding, policy, trust and mistrust, bias, and the siloed service structure as well as some unique border area barriers.

Fear

The most commonly discussed barrier to service receipt was fear due to the rhetoric and atmosphere that the Trump administration created, which has made immigrant and mixed-status families afraid of enrolling in government-based programs due to potential immigration repercussions. One participant noted, "Well, the big challenge is that there was a tremendous amount of fear in the immigrant community even before the pandemic that this administration has been enacting very strict and harsh immigration policies. Some of them that we feel are actually unlawful." Another participant shared, "Our families are afraid now, more than ever...They see it on social media, you know? They see people getting beat up. They see people getting yelled at and called out for speaking another language. This drives them deeper into hiding and deeper into an area where they normally wouldn't have to go to hide, or they wouldn't feel the need to hide. I think all this hate and all this rhetoric is going to take...a long time for people to come out from hiding...They want to avoid becoming victims, and it's going to take them a while."

Eligibility Issues

Several participants discussed the negative impact of lack of eligibility for government-based services and assistance, (e.g., SNAP, Medicaid, housing, and childcare assistance) on undocumented and mixed-status families. Participants also highlighted the lack of eligibility for childcare assistance for children who are not U.S. citizens. During the COVID-19 pandemic, mixed-status families and undocumented immigrants were left out of the CARES Act stimulus package, meaning that they did not receive stimulus checks and were not eligible for unemployment benefits. For example, one participant remarked, "We were concerned that our clients are the clients that unfortunately are not getting stimulus checks from the government. They're not eligible for unemployment benefits. Many of them are left out of the CARES Act so we realized that our clients are in need of assistance because of COVID."

Language Access

While many community leaders mentioned that their agencies provide services and information in Spanish, they still noted the presence of language barriers, including a lack of bilingual staff and elected officials. One participant highlighted how the language barrier can further complicate navigation of already bureaucratic systems for immigrant families. Another participant spoke to the challenge of accessing accurate information about COVID-19 in Spanish, stating, "There was a ton of information

early on in March that was being presented, that was medical information, that was relevant to the virus that was not in Spanish. So, a ton of our communities were just left with, like, 'Well I guess I'm going to get my news from like Univision, Primer Impacto...'"

Lack of Information and Misinformation

Participants also highlighted misinformation and lack of information about available services as significant barriers to service receipt among immigrant families. Participants noted that oftentimes immigrant families do not have adequate information about the services that are available, where to find them, and what they are eligible for. One participant said, "A lot of them don't have any idea, you know, where to get services or are leery to go and get services because of their status or because they're immigrants and... they worry about being deported and stuff, so they tend to not want to have anything to do with getting any type of service or anything." Another participant highlighted how the complexity of public assistance systems acts as a barrier, stating "And so that can become a potential barrier or just a challenge because having to learn like these public assistance systems...they're not set up to be user friendly, right? You go to apply for cash assistance or Medicaid or food stamps and like the applications, they've tried to make them more user friendly, but they're not streamlined. They're not friendly."

Some participants spoke about how some service providers themselves sometimes lack information or education on how to provide services to immigrant families, which in turn exacerbates mistrust of service providers and government agencies. Several people highlighted the issue of the spread of misinformation about COVID-19 infection, testing, and treatment. State representatives admitted that families in some communities still don't know that services exist, and identified one of their priorities as communication and providing access to information to providers. One participant stated, "It is hard to get the word out. It's hard for folks to know what's available and feel comfortable, and I think that's especially true of families who have concerns about immigration because I think there's a lot of fear."

Lack of Funding & Funding Restrictions

Participants identified lack of funding and funding restrictions as significant barriers to providing services to immigrant families. Agencies are not able to provide some services funded by the federal government (e.g., housing) to undocumented families. Organizations have adapted by raising private funds and utilizing local funding to provide services to immigrants. A government representative noted, "We provide grants to local nonprofits in the form of our Telshor fund that directs those types of services to serve everybody in our community. So domestic violence shelters, food banks, local youth-serving organizations...We give those folks money. We grant them money each year through the City that we basically say everybody should be able to access these programs that we are funding."

Policy Barriers

Participants cited stricter immigration policies over the past four years as a reason families do not seek services. Many people spoke about how misinformation and confusion about the Trump administration's public charge rule caused new client numbers to drop and existing clients to stop using services due to fear of immigration repercussions. Mixed-status families with eligible citizen children in need of food stamps and other public assistance refrained from applying for benefits for fear of jeopardizing other family members' immigration status. One legal service provider said, "I would say the public charge rule had an incredible chilling effect on immigrant families. In fact, we saw immigrant families that were seeking relief and could do what they needed to do to naturalize and do the things

that they needed to do to, you know, fill out petitions. They were in status, but they were even afraid themselves to look for any kind of public benefits or services because there was just miscommunication.”

Reluctance and Mistrust

Some participants talked about hesitancy, not necessarily fear, among immigrants to seek services. This was mainly due to mistrust of government agencies and reluctance to provide personal information due to undocumented status within the family, which could lead to immigration issues. Several participants stated that agencies that asked for minimal personal information, referred them to agencies with good follow through, and provided several services on-site were more trusted than others. One service provider stated, "the minute they hear that it's federally funded, they're kind of like, oh no, I don't want to get involved with this." Service providers have to make intentional efforts to clarify their policies around collecting personal information. For example, this same service provider stated, "We don't ask any questions about, you know, social security numbers. If we do, if for some reason [we] do require some security numbers and, you know, [they] don't want to share it, that's okay. We can still provide the services for [them], but you have to kind of create that relationship with them, and they really have to feel safe."

Additionally, many participants reported that families are more likely to seek services or ask for service recommendations from agencies or service providers that have already built trust with the families. One participant noted, "Again, I think when they have a strong relationship, a strong built relationship with an agency or mentor, they are more resilient, and they're more confident in asking for support. In my experience, that's what I've seen... So, when we receive a family that is just enrolling, it takes us at least a good three months to build that relationship and that trust with the family before they're willing to tell us what their needs are." Several participants talked about the political climate of fear that the Trump administration created and how that contributed to mistrust in government agencies. A state early childhood representative noted, "Right now parents think that if they go to our office, and they're not legally here in the United States that, in a way, we are connected to immigration since we are a state government agency. But no, we are not, and we don't require any legal status for the parents."

Bias

State government has struggled with promoting their programs to immigrant families because of potential political backlash and personal bias among some state staff. One state representative expressed a desire to be able to better target immigrants, stating, "I would [like to] have the freedom to promote those programs and to really target that population and...just say 'You're hearing directly from the authorities. This program - you qualify. It doesn't affect you. Come and enroll. This is how you enroll.' I feel some of the challenge that I have is that I do have staff that have their own biases. We have our own biases. And they may speak their language, but they are not really understanding how to support our immigrant population. And they perhaps feel that they shouldn't be here...That's the part that probably is more concerning, when you have people who are supposed to help the people, that are still feeling that they shouldn't be helping. So that's probably [a] barrier".

Siloed Service Structure

Some agency leaders identified the lack of a streamlined service structure as a barrier to adequately serving immigrant families. One participant from the education sector reported, "It was difficult to connect the families because everything was siloed. So, we didn't know this organization was doing this over here, or we didn't know this other organization was doing this over here. And even if they

were...I'm going to be frank with you, organizations and people get territorial and, you know, while these are our clients, [and] we're going to work with them, we're not going to share. We're not going to give information or anything like that. So, that was one of the hard things that our social work team had to do, was navigate that process and overcome or join together those different silos."

Many participants also expressed a need for a central, up-to-date service directory, since existing directories quickly become obsolete and outdated. For example, one participant reported that there had been a resource book listing all the agencies in the community and the services that they provide, "but things change so quickly that by the time you print it up, half of the agencies or half the organizations aren't doing that anymore. So, it was really hard to keep up-to-date information on that."

In addition, participants discussed the lack of a central hub where immigrant families can receive services in a single location. Currently, families have to go to multiple agencies to seek services, which may discourage people from seeking further services. As such, participants recommended streamlining the process, setting up a central referral system, and having a central service location. One of the participants suggested, "You could put them in one building and have a one-stop-shop situation, where people come in, [and] they don't have to go to another building, another place, you know? They can come apply for the SNAP program, apply for WIC, pick up a basket of food to take home that day, set up appointments for legal aid to help them with their immigration status. I mean it could all be in one facility to do a little bit more for them, but that's just not the reality of it."

Unique Border Area Barriers

Doña Ana County is characterized by unique borderland features, including border checkpoints, ICE and Border Patrol presence, and *colonias*, which all impact access to and receipt of services among the immigrant community. Several participants talked about the geographic makeup of the region being a barrier to families accessing services. For example, participants highlighted that rural communities in and around Doña Ana County often lack the services and/or infrastructure to meet the service needs of immigrant families, especially in the *colonias*. Most service providers are concentrated in the city of Las Cruces, making it difficult for those who live in the surrounding rural areas to access those services. These geographic barriers are exacerbated by the presence of border checkpoints, which prohibit individuals without legal documentation from traveling in and out of the checkpoint area. One legal services provider has responded to this challenge by opening another office on the other side of a checkpoint so that undocumented clients could access their services despite the barrier posed by the immigration checkpoint.

Other participants talked about the role that fear of encountering immigration officials (e.g., Border Patrol and ICE) plays in families' service seeking behavior. One individual said that families have "gone into hiding, just not really willing to go out and do anything, maybe just barely going food shopping. Some of the families in Sunland Park, closer to the border, they were being...harassed by law enforcement, Border Patrol, and were only sending their children out to food shop so that they made sure that the families were not together because they were afraid of enforcement actions separating the families." Another agency leader stated, "I think the biggest barrier is the fear that we live in an incredibly militarized border community. I think, you know, a lot of our immigrant and mixed-status families that we work with, it takes a while for them to feel, really feel powerful, to feel empowered and to do it publicly because there's a fear that they'll be targeted." Many participants talked about families feeling fear due to family separation and past immigration raids when the county sheriff and border patrol collaborated to deport people, which has had a lasting impact on the immigrant community.

IMMIGRANT NEEDS

Many participants discussed how the pandemic has spotlighted and exacerbated existing needs for immigrant families. Fear due to the pandemic has coincided with increased fear due to legal status, creating multiple layers of stress for many families. COVID-19 has brought to the forefront how the lack of internet access and technology, especially in rural areas, is significantly impeding students' ability to engage in online learning as well as families' access to services, particularly those services that have shifted to online platforms (e.g., telehealth medical and mental health services).

Technology and Education

Participants identified technology and education as significant needs among immigrant families, which have become even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants noted that many families do not have access to internet or technological equipment (e.g., computers) and that many parents struggle to use this technology and navigate online processes and platforms. One participant explained, "They don't always have as much access to the Internet as other people do, or even basic telephone kinds of services...Then as we moved into COVID, it got even worse when so much of education had to be done online and their lack of technology and access to broadband Internet made things even worse." This lack of access to internet services coupled with parents' unfamiliarity with technology has impeded e-learning for many students. One participant stated, "[There is] a huge barrier gap between the schools and parents, especially parents who don't speak English, who don't necessarily know how to work technology, and then they got shifted immediately into virtual learning. I mean, I think all kinds of parents struggled, but I think particularly parents who are immigrants and don't speak English were left sort of in the dark." Another participant described the challenge posed by many immigrant parents' lack of formal education, "Many of the parents of the children have very little to no formal education. So, reading literacy, that was very difficult for us because we were trying to explain a program, we were trying to explain the benefits that come with the program, and naturally, they're very suspicious of it, right?"

Health and Mental Health Services

Several participants reported that undocumented individuals often fear accessing health and mental health services, and that this fear has an additional emotional and physical toll on families. One healthcare provider explained, "Now they know the rhetoric to be even more fearful, and I think a big thing is the emotional and mental health that living in this country undocumented has on people and...their health outcomes. You know, just living with [the] fear of being deported, having your family split up, having loved ones who are locked up, that's a lot of, you know, emotional toll, which also affects your health." Additional factors contributing to poor health outcomes among immigrant families include a lack of bilingual counselors, funding restrictions on serving undocumented individuals, and the border patrol checkpoints. These factors, in turn, lead to increased use of emergency rooms as a last resort to obtain healthcare.

Nonetheless, many people reported that immigrant families do frequently access income-based clinics (e.g., Ben Archer Health Centers, La Clinica de Familia, and Amador Health Center). These clinics do not have as many eligibility-related barriers, such as health insurance, which many immigrants do not have. One person explained, "many of those families may qualify for Medicaid, and they just have like all the health care, you know, up there and available. But for those who do not qualify for Medicaid, they may have to go into those clinics, who provide services [on a] scale and that kind of thing." However,

the COVID-19 pandemic has also taxed service providers by increasing demand for services while limiting funding and financial resources.

Legal Services

Participants reported that legal services, particularly to address immigration issues, are a significant need among immigrant families. Catholic Charities is the primary and one of the only providers of immigration legal services in southern New Mexico. However, one participant noted that the community still lacks a sufficient number of immigration lawyers as well as the resources to pay for legal representation.

Transportation

Transportation was also identified as a significant need and a barrier to accessing services for immigrant families as well as for specific populations such as the homeless, families living in rural communities, and undocumented individuals. One service provider noted, "But sometimes what it comes down to is the families that have the transportation or the means to get to those events are the ones that show up." For undocumented immigrants the transportation issue is further complicated by their legal status. As one participant highlighted, "You're afraid if you get pulled over. You can get deported. It's a very risky thing to try to drive you know...go through the red light, you could get pulled over, and then the next thing you know, you're getting deported. So, I think transportation is definitely an issue."

COVID-Related Needs and Challenges

Additionally, participants identified several new challenges for immigrant families in light of COVID. These include:

- **Child Care.** Many families have lost access to childcare due to the pandemic. Some parents have family members or neighbors take care of their children, but those who do not have support struggle to afford childcare.
- **Economic Protections.** Several participants reported that immigrant families, who often work in service industries, have seen huge cuts in employment and income during the pandemic, resulting in family economic hardship and inability to meet basic needs. This loss of income has been particularly difficult for immigrant families who did not qualify for the initial stimulus checks and are not eligible for unemployment benefits.
- **Food.** Families have experienced increased food insecurity, resulting in increased need for emergency food resources (e.g., food baskets, food pantries, and soup kitchens).
- **Housing.** Participants noted an increased need for rent and mortgage assistance due to loss of income or jobs during the pandemic. One healthcare provider expressed worry about the increased vulnerability of immigrant families to the spread of COVID-19 due to small, shared living arrangements. Some service providers mentioned that they had seen an increase in domestic violence during the lockdown.
- **Workplace Concerns.** Participants described new workplace safety concerns for immigrants, especially agricultural workers, due to a lack of adequate social distancing measures and personal protective equipment (PPE). Many immigrants have placed themselves at risk of contracting and spreading COVID for fear of losing their jobs. One participant stated, "I think a lot of the issue is that because there's no protection for workers that if they're essential and they go get tested and they test positive, that they're gonna have to stay home for 14 days, and they can't really afford that. And

then they didn't get any extra income to support their families. So, I think figuring out ways to protect workers, especially those who are essential in this moment, so that they can get tested, stay healthy, keep their families healthy, is critical.”

LOCAL RESPONSES TO IMMIGRANT NEEDS

Despite the unique challenges facing the borderlands, these communities have responded with innovative local approaches to address the needs of their immigrant families.

Advocacy and Community Organizing

Immigrant organizations and immigrant-serving organizations have engaged in advocacy with elected officials at the local, state, and national levels to address the inequalities facing the immigrant community and mixed-status families. These organizations work to bring the needs of the immigrant community to the attention of state legislators on issues including, infrastructure in the *colonias* (e.g., sewage hookups, electric hookups, flood control, road paving), inhumane treatment of migrant workers and of immigrants at the border, the public charge rule, and inclusion of immigrants in COVID relief.

Organizations also utilize community organizing as an advocacy tool to empower immigrant families to have a voice and speak to elected officials at the local and state levels about the issues impacting them. For example, one agency leader remarked, “I mean, it’s our role, as organizers, to ensure that people feel empowered to be able to do that, but I will say that it’s hard because a lot of marginalized communities don’t always have access to people who are decision makers, and when they do, they are not always listened to. So, it’s definitely, you know, that continues to be part of our job...to ensure that elected officials, people who are making decisions about our communities, that they understand all the voices that are impacted by policy.” Advocacy organizations also conduct “know your rights” presentations and voter registration campaigns, and support immigrants who are interested in becoming elected officials, empowering community members to be active in the decision making processes that impact their community.

Community Agency Policy & Practice

Community agencies have implemented inclusive policies and practices that enable them to provide services to immigrant families, regardless of their immigration status. Oftentimes, a funding source will restrict agencies to only serve U.S. citizens with that funding. However, agencies in Doña Ana County have adapted by finding alternative funding sources in order to provide services to families regardless of immigration status. An agency leader remarked, “We don’t turn families [away], regardless of status. We find ways if we cannot serve them based on the funding source that limits us. We will find donors that might help support us or other sources that can help support families, but we will not turn them away [based] on their status.” Organizations have also adjusted their documentation requirements such that they do not ask families about their immigration status and allow clients to provide alternative forms of identification. For example, one participant explained, “Most of the organizations that we deal with, they’re not asking you if you’re an American citizen. They’re not asking you for any [documentation], you know...We ask for IDs, and it doesn’t matter if it’s a pasaporte. We just want to know who you are.”

Community agencies have also responded to meet the increased needs of the community as a result of the pandemic. These efforts may not be targeted specifically at immigrants, but are available to all families in the community, regardless of legal status. Many agencies spoke about using their

emergency funds to assist families in meeting their basic needs on a case-by-case basis. One childcare professional spoke about the grants and financial assistance available to different types of childcare facilities to assist families in these times. Agencies have partnered with each other and the city of Las Cruces to meet the increased demand for food baskets and food pantry services. Some participants reported that Comcast has helped respond to families' need for internet access for e-learning by providing low-cost internet to low-income families. When school administrators realized that many families were not accessing this resource, they discovered that Comcast was requiring social security numbers in order to access this service, and they worked with Comcast to modify the documentation requirement. Schools also responded to the internet access issue by dispersing hotspots and tablets to students for online learning. To meet increased housing assistance needs, one service provider reported reallocating funds without federal eligibility restrictions to housing in order to be able to provide this assistance to immigrant families.

Government Policy & Practice

In recent years, Las Cruces and Doña Ana County have implemented specific policies and practices to ensure the city and county are inclusive and welcoming of immigrant and mixed-status families. For example, the Las Cruces Resolution No. 18-075: "A Resolution Re-Affirming the City of Las Cruces Commitment to Creating a Quality of Place to Live and Work Through Nondiscrimination in all Areas of City Government and Declaring the City a Welcoming Community" designated Las Cruces as a "welcoming city," meaning that the city is guided by principles of inclusion and creating a community that makes everyone feel welcome regardless of immigration status. Some examples of actions they have taken based on these principles include ensuring that local law enforcement officers are not collaborating or acting in immigration enforcement capacities. In addition, the city has turned away federal funding, such as the Department of Homeland Security's Operation Stonegarden program, which would increase coordination between local law enforcement and federal authorities. One elected official stated, "One of the things that I did when I came on as a city councilor in my very first year was oppose the Stone Garden funding, which was a federal grant through FEMA that essentially...directs local law enforcement to cooperate with Border Patrol agencies and other federal agencies in cases related to like immigration status. They call it a border security program. But what it actually does is it creates an atmosphere of fear that local law enforcement will be cooperating with federal immigration agencies, and so I voted to defund that the first year I was here. I was not successful, and I was outvoted. And the second year, I managed to get a four-three vote on it, and that was part of what I wanted to do to lessen that fear, right? And basically, we said, hey, look, if you are engaging with local law enforcement, there should be no fear that you will be deported or that you will be turned into immigration officials." At the county level, the Board of County Commissioners passed a resolution called "Safe Community for All Residents" several years ago prohibiting employees of any department from asking about immigration status. In addition, nonprofits receiving city funds are exempt from reporting people's immigration status.

Both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, city and county government in Doña Ana County have leveraged local funding to fill the gaps left by restrictive federal funding. A city councilor explained that "On a yearly basis, we provide all sorts of money to all sorts of organizations...I can say definitively that we're very supportive of helping other human beings. And in my case, I would say, irrespective of legal status...We make contributions to Catholic Charities and not necessarily earmarked for a special service for immigrants, but when any allocations are made, it means that to any organization that money is allocated to necessarily, it frees up other funds to use however they want to use them." With respect to the city's COVID-19 response, another participant remarked, "I'm really proud

of the response from the City of Las Cruces, putting in \$1.8 million for various nonprofits, you know, specifically with the thought in mind to address our immigrant and mixed-status families that otherwise would not have received any funding at all.”

STATE EARLY CHILDHOOD RESPONSE

In 2019, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham and the New Mexico Legislature created the Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD), which officially launched on July 1, 2020. The Department’s aim is to create a more cohesive, equitable, and effective early childhood system in New Mexico, featuring a continuum of programs from prenatal to five and ensuring that families in every corner of the state can access the services they need. During its first year in operation, ECECD officials describe making concerted efforts to engage with and listen to communities, acknowledging a need to create solutions that are reflective of families’ self-defined needs and strengthen supports to immigrant communities. One agency representative stated, “We are all about promotion and prevention and assets-based and affirmation and providing really much needed support. We've been thinking about all of our communication mechanisms, especially during this pandemic, like how do you really reach people, and reaching people in the immigrant community has been a real priority for us, and I think we definitely have additional work to do.”

Agency representatives described initial efforts made to support children in immigrant families, including:

- Making economic stimulus funds available to immigrants. One agency representative explained, “As soon as we received the state stimulus that came to ECECD, we were clear that these funds were going to be available to everybody. So, any way that we spent the funds, there were no restrictions on immigration status...And here in New Mexico when the governor and members of the legislature were talking about additional financial supports and grants and loans, I mean, there was a lot of talk about making sure, and there were actually funds set aside, specifically to support immigrant families, so that has really [been] top of mind here in New Mexico.”
- Licensing temporary childcare sites during COVID that are home-based with small groups of children, allowing friends and family to become state-supported childcare sites.
- Providing resource linkage and program navigation assistance to connect families with other kinds of needed assistance.