

Rochester Area Budget Forum Testimony 1/24/22

Hi, I'm Cassandra Bocanegra (she/her), I live in the 19th ward of Rochester, and work for the Worker Justice Center of NY, where we work to empower communities who have long been denied justice and human rights with a focus on agricultural and other low wage workers through legal representation, community empowerment and advocacy for institutional change.

We are members of the Fund Excluded Workers Coalition as we have seen first hand the impact the lack of a safety net has had on our communities. We have fielded calls from members of our community, unsure of how they were going to pay for medical expenses, child care or rent due to the inability to work or receive any sort of unemployment benefit during this pandemic.

Due to the very real struggle we have witnessed, I am here to discuss 2 priorities that our coalition has. The first is to replenish the Excluded Workers Fund that was established last year and the second is to create a permanent alternative to unemployment for excluded workers.

The EWF has provided critical support for community members in our region who are using these relief funds to finally pay down debt, address medical needs, buy school supplies, put food on the table, and have the freedom to leave abusive partners and unsafe work conditions. It has also boosted our regional economies with Western NY and the Fingerlakes region seeing a combined boost of \$9 million as a direct result of the EWF from 2021. These benefits are outlined in a report from the Immigration Research Initiative that was released today, which I will submit to you along with my written testimony.

Although the EWF has significantly helped our communities, unfortunately, tens of thousands of workers were shut out of the program due to insufficient funding. Just 8 short weeks after opening the fund, DOL notified the public that benefits could no longer be guaranteed to eligible applicants because they were running out of money. DOL closed the application portal entirely just two weeks later. In the end 75,000 applicants were denied due to insufficient funds, and ten of thousands more never even had the chance to apply. Unfortunately, a disproportionate number of those who were shut out of the program live in Rochester and the surrounding communities.

That's why we're calling for the state to replenish EWF with \$3 billion in next year's budget. This would serve 170,000 more workers – including the 75,000 denied due to insufficient funds. 10% of this \$3B would be reserved for administration, including renewed grants to CBOs that provide application assistance.

- With a smarter implementation plan, we could also get us closer to geographic equity - we could serve another 4,000 people across Western NY and the Finger Lakes and infuse up to \$70 million into our local economies

COVID highlighted the enormous gaps in our social safety net. More people are shut out of these programs than we knew. Our “Excluded No More Legislation,” sponsored by Assm. Reyes and Sen. Ramos, would establish a permanent alternative to unemployment insurance for excluded workers. It ensures when the next crisis strikes our state or a family, NY’s most vulnerable workers are cared for when they lose their jobs.

Our bill draft is still awaiting a bill number, but here are the basics:

- “Excluded No More” would provide benefits to:
 - (1) undocumented workers earning less than \$56,000 (NY median individual earnings),
 - (2) workers paid in cash with very small employers (domestic workers, day laborers) earning less than \$56,000, and
 - (3) self-employed workers (street vendors, house painters) facing an adverse event (losing multiple clients) earning less than \$45,000 in net income (80% of median individual earnings)
- Costs. Approved applicants would get a flat payment that matches the average NY state rate for unemployment insurance, currently \$1,200 per month. This program would cost \$800M in the first year. \$800M would cover 50,000 people, along with administration costs. Any surplus would be rolled over to the following year.

Thank you for taking the time to listen, I hope that you will see the necessity in supporting both of these measures.