

Good afternoon, my name is Jessica Maxwell. I am the Executive Director of the Workers Center of Central New York, based in Syracuse, NY.

Our organization is a membership organization representing hundreds of workers in low-wage sectors across Central New York and the North Country. Our members work in agriculture, construction, landscaping, cleaning, packing plants, sawmills and restaurants. Many of our members are immigrants who lack work authorization and people working in the informal cash economy. I am also writing today as a member of the Fund Excluded Workers coalition. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony for the Workforce Development Hearing.

I am writing in support of funding the Unemployment Bridge Program in this year's New York State budget, a program that would provide unemployment coverage to 750,000 workers excluded from traditional insurance with up to 30,000 people expected to receive benefits at any given time. The focus of this program is on low-income New Yorkers—freelancers, self-employed workers, undocumented workers, people released from prison or immigrant detention, and those in the cash economy who are earning less than \$56,000 annually. These are the workers who don't have savings accounts to dip into or personal safety nets to keep them afloat when they lose work. These are also often essential workers who are vital to the well-being of our communities, and who deserve to be included in our existing social safety nets. They are the workers who most need this type of support in order to continue putting food on the table for themselves and their families and to cover basic needs. Providing economic stability to these vulnerable workers also provides stability to our communities by allowing them to pay their bills and stay in place while they look for new work.

Senator Jessica Ramos has re-introduced the bill for the Unemployment Bridge Program—S3192—to create this program and Assemblymember Karines Reyes carries it in the Assembly.

To ensure the Unemployment Bridge Program is revenue-neutral, the bill adds a digital ad tax that is expected to raise up to \$1 billion for NYS. This tax would collect a small portion of annual revenues of digital advertising services from companies with gross annual revenues of \$100M from such services—leaving no burden on the state, small businesses, or individual taxpayers.

Studies show that for every dollar provided in unemployment compensation, recipients generate \$1.93 back into the economy. The Immigration Research Initiative estimates upwards of millions to be re-invested right back into New York. The solution is clear - ensuring access to the safety net is morally imperative, good for workers, the economy,

and our communities. This bill represents a win-win for NYS and our workers. NY has the opportunity to set the standard nationally by implementing an innovative unemployment program that embraces the new realities of work in our rapidly changing economy and ensuring funding by closing loopholes that have allowed some of the most profitable employers to avoid paying their fair share.

As a nation, we may be moving beyond the worst impacts of the global Covid pandemic. Yet, excluded workers will continue to face a crisis, because they are excluded from the social safety net. This program must be included in this year's budget.

The majority of our members work in agriculture, an industry now dominated by immigrant workers. National estimates show upwards of 75% of US agricultural workers are immigrant workers (<https://rural.as.cornell.edu/undocumented-farmworkers-nys>, <https://www.newsweek.com/nearly-half-us-farmworkers-undocumented-ending-illegal-immigration-could-devastate-economy-1585202>, <https://www.fwd.us/news/immigrant-farmworkers-and-americas-food-production-5-things-to-know/>), and NYS is not an exception to this trend. Agriculture is also one of the most dangerous industries: farm work consistently ranks as one of the ten most dangerous jobs based on workplace fatalities and injuries--*twice as deadly as law enforcement and five times as deadly as fire fighting* (<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/12/27/the-10-most-dangerous-jobs-in-america-according-to-bls-data.html>). Yet, we hear every month from workers who are tolerating inhumane and unsafe conditions because ***they fear losing their job if they speak up because they have no safety net if they lose work.***

Just this month a worker reached out to us from a large dairy farm in the North Country. Several workers are not receiving minimum wage, others are being forced to work overtime on their mandatory day of rest, without receiving overtime pay. They are being overcharged for housing, over \$260/month over the allowable limit for employer deductions for shared housing. Housing is full of bed bugs and roaches, and workers are carrying their clothing and bedding to the milk house to do laundry because there are no laundry facilities available to them. Workers have organized and requested a meeting, and the owner refused to meet with them and is now retaliating with shift changes and selective firing of those perceived to be leaders. Others are afraid to speak up and file a complaint because DOL complaints take months, even years to resolve and win monetary awards, while firing is immediate and for farm workers often leads to eviction from employer provided housing as well. The stakes for standing up for one's basic human rights are very high for undocumented workers.

These stories are not unique. Over 130,000 New Yorkers were able to access the historic Excluded Workers Fund. In what was by far one of the most efficient and effective pandemic relief programs, \$2.1 billion was allocated in just nine weeks. That experience confirmed what our community based organizations have known for decades, that there is an enormous need for jobless aid, and many, many New Yorkers live in the margins of the safety net. But unlike many intransigent social problems, it also showed us that we are capable of solving this one.

The UBP takes the best practices of traditional Unemployment Insurance and the innovative Excluded Workers Fund, incorporates key feedback from dozens of meetings with constituents and officials and creates an historic new program.

UBP is a lifeline for the self-employed. Freelance work is a growing part of our economy. Often denied or exempt from critical labor protections—the UBP would cover 180,000 thousand street vendors, truly self-employed beauty and nail salon workers, writers, photographers and digital media artists, management and technical consultants, auto repair and maintenance workers, and farm owners.

This is a carceral justice issue. 20,000 workers re-entering the labor force after prison or detention would be covered during their first year post release. Providing recently incarcerated people access to UI is cost-effective. Recidivism can cost the state upwards of \$50,000 per person per incident; this fund would provide a maximum of \$7,200 per year in benefits (6 months times \$1,200), and would give everyone the security of knowing they could be covered if they needed it. Incarcerated labor subsidizes our state with everything from low-cost furniture to mass produced pandemic hand sanitizer.

This is an immigrant justice issue. Immigrant workers pay over \$100 million a year into the Unemployment Insurance system in New York—but cannot access a cent. Undocumented workers pay \$1.1 billion every year in New York state and local sales, property, and income taxes.

For those in the shadows of the cash economy—the street vendors, the domestic workers, nannies, service and restaurant workers and day laborers often exploited in informal industries—the UBP would provide a critical support in hard times.

Lastly, this is a racial and economic justice issue.

The Immigration Research Initiative has [found](#) that 73% of the New Yorkers who would benefit from the Unemployment Bridge Program are non-white, compared to 27% who

are white. Black and brown workers are disproportionately impacted by unemployment with, for example, Black unemployment rates typically running nearly twice as high as the rate for white.

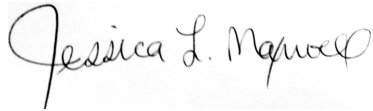
While we continue on the path to New York's full recovery, we urge the state legislature to invest in social safety net programs that prepare us, safeguard our communities, and sustain our economy. Let's learn the lessons of this pandemic and work towards increased resiliency for our communities.

Our families' ability to survive and put food on the table depends on it.

To summarize, I submit this testimony in wholehearted support of the Unemployment Bridge Program. We are counting on you, our elected representatives—to bring this program home this session.

Thank you for your time and your engagement.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jessica L. Maxwell". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

Jessica Maxwell
Exec Dir, Workers Center of Central New York