The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the value of essential workers, many of whom are undocumented in California and unable to apply for federal and state benefits. Photo: Doug McKnight.

Emergency relief for undocumented immigrants became available last week in California, but demand outweighs the supply of cash. For years, advocates have been fighting to shore up the economic safety net for these workers, many of whom are in essential industries. Now, they say more assistance is crucial.

Imagine choosing between food or soap. That’s a reality for a mother in Salinas who I recently spoke with via Zoom. She said the pandemic has affected her tremendously.

“Emotionally you have that fear, but monetarily as well because we are working very few hours and so right now our expenses are more than what I can afford,” she said in Spanish.

We’re not using her name because she’s undocumented. She’s worked in agriculture for about 16 years, mainly in strawberry fields.

“I try to protect myself and practice social distancing at work, but I’m afraid all the time, but I also have to work,” she said.

She makes around $12 or $13 an hour. Recently, her hours have been cut in half.
Tim McManus, an advocate for immigrants, says the COVID-19 crisis reveals the importance of having a safety net.

“We have essential workers in our community that do not have a safety net,” he said.

McManus is an organizer with COPA, Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action. The regional non-profit is the local affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation, a network of faith and community-based groups. IAF members across California have been working to help undocumented immigrants during this crisis.

Nearly one in ten workers in the state is undocumented, according to the Public Policy Institute of California. It estimates around 81,500 undocumented immigrants live in Monterey, San Benito and Santa Cruz counties.

In mid-April, Governor Gavin Newsom allocated $75 million in emergency assistance to undocumented immigrants impacted by the pandemic. Philanthropic organizations and private donors pledged an additional $50 million.

But, undocumented immigrants still don’t qualify for the federal stimulus checks and can’t apply for unemployment insurance. They are also barred from the state’s tax credit program for low-income workers.

“Governor Newsom has come out many times to talk about the value of the immigrant community, a recognition that the undocumented are part of California and deserve to be part of the California dream. And this... this is contradictory to leaving people out of that tax break,” said McManus.

It’s called the earned income tax credit and results in a cash rebate to low-income workers. Depending on how much you make and how many children you have, you could qualify for a couple hundred dollars or nearly $3,000. The program, CalEITC, started in 2015 in the state and is modeled after the federal earned income tax credit. One of the requirements to apply is a social security number.

Many undocumented workers file their taxes using an individual taxpayer ID number (ITIN). If those taxpayers could qualify for the earned income tax
credit, it would benefit more than 600,000 people, according to the California Immigrant Policy Center. The Center estimates they contribute more than $3.2 billion in state and local taxes.

“This is something that has been talked about before and there hasn't really been the political will to finish it off and make it happen,” McManus said.

A bill to expand the program passed the Assembly last year, 55 to 18. The legislation estimates it would cost $60 million in its first year. But despite supporters' hopes, funding was not included in Governor Newsom’s latest budget.

H.D. Palmer, deputy director for the State Department of Finance, said the governor is maintaining the program as is.

“The fiscal reality of what we have to deal with in closing a budget gap now that's more than $54 billion is something that constrains our ability to expand existing programs, let alone start new ones,” said Palmer.

Also absent in the budget is funding for a plan to expand healthcare coverage for undocumented immigrants over the age of 65. Money for schools and reducing homelessness has been cut.

State Senator Anna Caballero, whose district includes the Salinas Valley, has supported extending California’s earned income tax credit to undocumented immigrants. She says the challenge in promoting this assistance is timing.

“It hurts me to see people assume that if we don't do it, that we don't really care because we do,” said Caballero.

She says once the economy starts to pick back up, the legislature will go back and see what they can add in.

"It's going to be a matter of trying to figure out what's happening in the economy and what are the things we absolutely have to do to keep people safe,” she said.

State Senator Bill Monning, who represents the 17th Senate District, said of all the states, California is best positioned to move this forward.

“I think COVID-19 has really demonstrated and underscored the contributions of low income workers in our state and our national economy. And so it's really a common sense issue and it's really an equity issue,” Monning said.

Immigrant advocates say they’re not giving up, especially now.

“At the same time that we can see the disparity right now. We also can see how much we benefit from them,” said Maria Elena Manzo, a COPA leader.
COPA’s Tim McManus says this fight is about recognition through policy, and putting money in people’s pockets.

“So forgetting about what you think about fairness or justice or morality, this is an economic stimulus. We’re gonna recover stronger if all of California can land back on their feet sooner,” he said.

For now, amid the state’s stalled economy, it appears undocumented workers will have to wait. The mother we met in the beginning of this story says she’s applied for California’s emergency cash payments for undocumented immigrants, but has not yet heard back.