

# Faced with desperate circumstances, nearly 2M people in Texas - including these Houstonians - won't see a stimulus check

By Tulsı Kamath April 1, 2020

**HOUSTON** – Alba Garcia, 51, has a decision to make. Does she pay rent Wednesday or does she buy food for her 7-year-old daughter?

“Maybe I should try and pay my rent because I can’t bear for me and my daughter to be on the streets. I can beg for food but I can’t lose my apartment,” she said in Spanish. Joe Higgs, an organizer for **The Metropolitan Organization (TMO)** acted as a translator. TMO works with Holy Ghost Catholic Church where Garcia is a member.



Garcia is among the millions in the U.S. who are facing uncertain times as the unprecedented coronavirus pandemic has brought the economy to a grinding halt. Making ends meet by cleaning houses, Garcia had several steady jobs before COVID-19 spread became a serious concern in the Houston-area. However, since the outbreak, she says she went to work at only one home and another one of her clients chose to pay her despite not working.

Garcia’s loss in income has put her and her daughter in a precarious position, having to choose between avoiding coronavirus and ensuring basic necessities like shelter and food.

While Garcia’s plight is not unlike many in Texas who lost their jobs or sources of income due to the pandemic, she will not be getting help from the federal government during these trying times.

Last week, Congress passed and President Donald Trump signed the history-making \$2 trillion aid package to get immediate help to Americans and businesses. One part of that plan includes a one-time stimulus check to most Americans who qualify — \$1,200 for an adult, \$2,400 for a couple and \$500 per child. A person’s yearly income will be the main deciding factor on whether or not they will get a stimulus check in the coming weeks.

While Garcia’s yearly income falls well within the range of those who will get a check, she will not get one because she is an undocumented immigrant. Garcia says she escaped an abusive marriage in El Salvador and came to the U.S. in 2002 to help provide for her five children. She has worked numerous jobs ever since but was never able to save for a rainy day because what little she had left after rent and necessities, she sent back to El Salvador for her children.

“She’s saying she’s not here for a vacation,” said Higgs as he translated for Garcia. “She’s had a very hard life there and she’s had a very hard life here and (the coronavirus crisis) is just making it harder.”

In a virtual discussion with members of her church Friday, Garcia said the situation made her very sad because she and other undocumented immigrants in the country would not be getting any help.

About 17% of people in Texas are immigrants and nearly 35% of that group is undocumented, [according to the American Immigration Council](#). In 2017, the number of undocumented immigrants in Texas was estimated at [1.8 million](#). Nationally, unauthorized workers make up about 5% of the U.S. labor force — around 7.6 million people, according to [the latest estimates from the Pew Research Center](#). Undocumented immigrants are not eligible for most federal benefits.

According to the [National Immigration Law Center](#) — which dissected the [800-page stimulus bill](#) — only immigrants with valid Social Security numbers and people who qualify as “resident aliens” will receive the checks. That excludes even more immigrants who are in the country legally as well, [the Miami Herald reports](#). While many undocumented immigrants pay taxes using an [Individual Tax Identification Number](#) (similar to a Social Security Number) that is issued by the IRS, they will not be able to see some monetary relief from the emergency aid package Trump signed last week.

Mateo Hernandez, 57, says he is one such taxpaying undocumented immigrant. The Houston resident works as a machinist for a company that fabricates machines for oil companies. Three people on his team have been laid off already and between low oil prices and coronavirus, Hernandez has no guarantee of the future.

Hernandez told KPRC 2 he gets paid in \$800 in cash each week but he still pays his taxes because he says he knows the benefits of paying taxes and how it helps the government help people. Hernandez, who is considered a mentor in his church, said several church members have asked him if he could help them after they lost their jobs in the past weeks

He told KPRC 2 through Higgs that he was worried about his friends and family members, especially those who worked in the foodservice industry prior to the coronavirus outbreak.

[The Metropolitan Organization \(TMO\)](#) — which is a coalition of organizations and religious institutions — is working with Garcia’s and Hernandez’s church to help them and others in dire situations. Their two big focuses during the coronavirus crisis are ensuring the poorest and most vulnerable people in the Houston area have food security and don’t lose housing.

“As Rev. John Ogletree of First Metropolitan Church and TMO said at a TMO virtual press conference on Wednesday, March 18, ‘hourly and part-time workers like waiters, cleaning crews, bartenders, dishwashers and others are losing their income and this is forcing them to decide whether to buy food, pay utility bills or pay rent,’” the group wrote in a press release.

Among their demands from local lawmakers, TMO is asking that Gov. Greg Abbott place a moratorium on evictions.

“Texas needs a uniform approach so that families in all 252 counties will know that they will not be evicted from their homes during this crisis,” the group wrote.

Most evictions are halted across the state until at least April 20, due to a Texas Supreme Court [order](#), but landlords are still posting notices to vacate and threatening to kick out renters after the moratorium elapses, Zoe Middleton of Texas Housers [told The Texas Tribune](#). Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo suspended evictions through March but [indicated in a press conference Tuesday](#) that she was prepared to extend the ban past April 20 if the state didn’t act first.

However, an eviction moratorium isn’t a cure-all. Tenants still have to worry about racking up late fees in the meantime and having to back pay several months of rent when the order is lifted. It also doesn’t provide a solution for people who have a complete loss of income as the moratorium only temporarily prevents their eviction.

Faced with paying \$850 in rent Wednesday, Garcia said she didn't know what to do. Her landlord is understanding. A letter Garcia shared with KPRC 2 reads in part:

“We understand that some tenants will be going through a hardship due to this epidemic. We will address each individual case and make written arrangements in the event you fall behind with your upcoming rent of April 2020.”

However, Garcia is concerned about a written arrangement with her landlord because she doesn't know when she will see another paycheck and is worried that she might not be able to pay, according to the adjusted timeline.

*Editor's Note: KPRC 2 has changed the names of the undocumented immigrants at their request.*