

With No Federal Aid, Immigrant Families, Students Lean on Local Support

By Emily Donaldson – May 4, 2020

With just a few weeks left in her senior year of high school, Miriam has a long list of questions weighing on her mind.

Will I cross the stage and collect a diploma? When will I see my friends again in person? Will college still start as planned this fall?

Her list grows every day.

Miriam's family of four came to the United States from Mexico and lacks legal immigration status. Like so many other undocumented families, Miriam's family members aren't eligible for the aid available to most other San Antonians, but they are experiencing the pains of the pandemic just like everyone else. Because they can't access unemployment benefits or stimulus relief, families like Miriam's are left to rely on community support to get by.

When the coronavirus shutdowns resulted in restaurant closures, Miriam's dad was laid off. Because of his immigration status, he isn't eligible for unemployment benefits and won't be able to find a job easily.

How will my family survive financially?

Miriam's grandmother was visiting when coronavirus began spreading and had to stay in San Antonio, so now five people – Miriam, her brother, grandmother, mom, and dad – are relying solely on her mom's income cleaning houses. *Will that money be enough?*

Then there's the fear that someone could get sick. Miriam's family doesn't have health insurance and, with a smaller income, any added expense can be a burden. *If we have to be tested, can we afford it?*

"It has to come out of our pocket, so how are we going to do that when my dad got laid off and my mom is the sole provider?" Miriam said. "And we pay more than \$1,000 in rent and we live in a two bedroom apartment with five people and one bathroom. It's a lot."

To help her parents, who don't speak English, Miriam fills out applications for financial aid and support services while trying to balance school work and the stress of graduating from high school and preparing for college.

Local aid a Band-Aid

One of the supports Miriam hopes will help her family is a new City program that provides \$25 million in financial relief for San Antonio residents. The money can be used for groceries, utilities, or rent and comes without citizenship requirements.

While it likely won't address every need that arises from the economic downturn, it has been touted as an example of how local government can partly fill a gap for families who don't qualify for federal aid.

"No strings attached, no citizenship necessary, no documents, no paper necessary. Just residents in San Antonio and economic need," said Father Bill Kraus of Our Lady of the Angels Catholic Church.

Kraus worked alongside other COPS/Metro leaders to lobby City Council to increase the fund from \$15.8 million to \$25 million before it gained final approval. And the organization's leaders are still working throughout the city to identify potential solutions for immigrant families.

Angelica Reyes, a COPS/Metro leader, parent in Harlandale Independent School District, and immigrant, discovered her own challenges as her school-age children switched to at-home learning. Reyes learned that she didn't have the basic computer skills needed to help her kids adjust to class on a computer. Reyes and other parents and decided to approach the district for help.

Angelica Salazar, a parent of three in San Antonio ISD, experienced similar troubles.

"I was feeling very frustrated because I didn't have the basic tools," Salazar said in Spanish. "We're all going through this hardship and we need to help our children with their homework."

Reyes approached administrators in Harlandale and Salazar spoke with leaders in SAISD. Harlandale staff offered Reyes and families three options: online computer training, working one-on-one with teachers, or in-person classes.

Classes with Spanish instruction offered began last week in Harlandale ISD. In SAISD, district leaders also committed to help but had not yet started offering the aid as of April 27, Salazar said.

Beyond help with computers, school districts have provided resources across the board for families regardless of their immigration status. In San Antonio, districts served more than 2 million meals since the pandemic started and campuses closed. They purchased computers and Wi-Fi hotspots for students to complete their schoolwork and started counseling hotlines to sustain mental wellness efforts.

Theirs and the City's work illustrates how local government entities have scrambled to find solutions for families without access to aid dependent on having citizenship status.

But there's still more help needed, said Viridiana Carrizales, the co-founder of nonprofit ImmSchools.

"Right now, the work is heavily falling on organizations, small organizations who are providing the support. That should not be coming from us, it should be coming from the government," Carrizales said.

"So if our federal government is not doing anything, if our state government doesn't want to do anything, we really have to push our local City Council to make sure we are protecting and providing for everyone who makes this city the city that it is."

'Dreamers' discounted

Courtney Balderas is another San Antonian directing students to the City Council fund for additional aid. Balderas works as the assistant director of the University of Texas at San Antonio's Dreamers Resource Center, serving students without U.S. citizenship.

When Congress passed a \$2 trillion stimulus package, with money sent directly to universities and colleges to support students experiencing financial hardship, U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos told higher education institutions to direct aid only to students eligible for federal financial aid, effectively excluding undocumented students.

Bottom of Form

This decision left institutions frantically searching for resources and funding to continue supporting them, Balderas said. UTSA is now offering its own emergency aid without any kind of citizenship requirement and has maintained already existing services like health care services and mental health support.

But Balderas still fears that students experiencing hardship will drop out and halt or postpone their education. She's not only one with that concern.

"While all of us are experiencing this pandemic, when it comes to our undocumented community overall, the impact is a bit deeper and it's felt stronger given the lack of access they have," Carrizales said.

"I think we're going to see a high number of really talented students drop out and see all the wasted potential because the way this country taxes our undocumented community just keep getting bigger and bigger."

And with the fate of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, before the Supreme Court and immigration policy's future in flux, Balderas underscored the need for immigrant students to continue

pursuing an education. She noted that future congressional immigration policy reform could have educational components and requirements tied to it.

“Nobody can take away your degree but also in the future, [education] could positively impact your ability to adjust your immigration status,” Balderas said.

Carrizales emphasized that immigrant students are paying the tuition that funds university services. They’re also paying taxes, she said.

The Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, a nonpartisan and nonprofit tax policy organization, reported in 2017 that undocumented immigrants contribute significantly to state and local taxes, paying approximately \$11.74 billion annually. In Texas, that number was roughly \$1.6 billion.

This point hits home for Miriam, whose list of questions about her life after high school is further complicated by coronavirus and its ripple effects.

‘It’s just the place we were born’

She and her family need support to remain financially afloat so that she can go to college next fall and study to become a bilingual teacher.

“Every year my dad does his taxes and pays whatever he needs to,” Miriam said. “Just because we don’t have some nine-digit number doesn’t mean that we are different from anyone else. It’s just the place we were born.”

Sometimes overwhelmed by all the uncertainties in her life, Miriam is trying to appreciate the end of her senior year and take her coronavirus quarantine one day at a time, playing board games with her brother, going on walks in the evening, and staying off Twitter, where coronavirus is frequently the No. 1 trending topic.