

USA: Vaccine Distribution Must Protect Immigrant Workers Who Lack Lawful Work Status

Saturday 23 January 2021, by [WILLIAMS Keisha](#) (Date first published: 9 January 2021).

There are [10.5 million](#) immigrants who are not legally authorized to work in the U.S. and 2.2 million immigrants with temporary status.

The Pew Research Center reports that if the current immigration trends continue, immigrants and their descendants will account for [78 percent of the United States population growth by 2065](#). These individuals are an indispensable aspect of the country, including its workforce.

In 2017, 29 million immigrant workers took part in the American workforce, including [7.6 million individuals](#) who were not authorized to work in the country. In fact, the Department of Agriculture reports that the work of immigrants who are not legally authorized to work in this country involves some of the most critical functions related to the country's food supply. Specifically, these individuals work on the nation's farms, pick and package fruits and vegetables, and work in plants that produce meats. In addition, these workers comprise [9 percent of the fast-food industry](#).

With about [half of the farming industry](#) made up of individuals who are not legally authorized to work in this country, the U.S. cannot afford to exclude these workers from the conversation about COVID-19 vaccine distribution.

As the Food and Drug Administration has [just approved the COVID-19 vaccine](#), where do these critical immigrant workers, who literally feed the nation, fall in line?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has put forth a comprehensive plan for vaccine distribution. First in line are [health care workers](#). Second are [individuals 65](#) years of age and over who have medical conditions that make them susceptible to COVID-19. Finally, the third wave is [essential workers](#), which include the education sector, *food and agriculture*, utilities, police, firefighters, correctional officers and the transportation industry. One group of workers who fall into the third priority group, in the food and agriculture industry, has been completely left out of the conversation — immigrant workers who lack a legal status to work in this country. The CDC has in no way addressed the fact that one half of the food and agriculture industry that it has prioritized are individuals who lack legal authorization to work in this country.

It is important to note that the CDC requires the disclosure of the names, birthdates, addresses and [ethnicities](#) of all persons taking the vaccine.

This all comes on the heels of one of the most hateful and [hostile administrations](#) that the immigrant community has ever faced. This means that workers without legal status to work in this country must make the choice between getting a vaccine that may save their lives and the country's food

supply, or risk immediate deportation and the devastation of their families.

It is very likely that some (if not many) in the immigrant community will fear getting a vaccine because there is no protection for them if they do so. Their personal information will be disclosed to health authorities and their immigrant status easily revealed.

Workers without legal status to work in this country must make the choice between getting a vaccine that may save their lives and the country's food supply, or risk immediate deportation and the devastation of their families.

Due to the importance of their work and its widespread impact on every American, their work status should not be a factor in vaccine distribution, and they should maintain the same priority as their counterparts in the food and agriculture industries. To require the disclosure of their personal information without protection is nearly a guarantee that the immigrant community will be left out of the vaccine distribution and the country's food supply will continue to be impacted as the [number of COVID-19 cases continues to rise](#) around the country and the world.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the CDC issued extensive [guidance and recommendations for the agriculture industry](#) due to the importance of the industry to the nation. Nonetheless, there were [outbreaks](#) at numerous [poultry plants](#), including Foster Farms in California, where 358 workers tested positive for COVID-19 this summer. The fruit and vegetable production industries were no different, with numerous outbreaks including 600 cases of COVID-19 in [Yakima County, Washington](#). In fact, in October 2020, Purdue University estimated that approximately [276,000](#) agriculture workers tested positive for COVID-19.

The Biden-Harris administration will have a real opportunity to make substantial — rather than incremental — change in how this country treats all persons, including immigrants, a community that has sorely lacked representation. For starters, they should institute a specific authorization for workers who lack legal status to receive the COVID-19 vaccine prioritization by virtue of their work, which has already been prioritized by the CDC. They should require the CDC to maintain as confidential the personal information of prioritized workers in critical industries and ensure that these workers receive the vaccine that may save their lives — and the country's food supply — without fear of deportation.

The sheer volume of COVID-19 cases as well as the ease with which it spreads demonstrates that the administration cannot successfully slow the spread of this disease if it fails to include undocumented workers — particularly those that have been prioritized by the CDC — in the COVID-19 vaccine distribution.

Finally, the Biden-Harris administration should take a long, hard look at how our country's immigration policies contribute to the systemic inequality that continues to plague this country.

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Keisha Williams, Truthout

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