

Equity

Chicago's migrant crisis raises questions of equity

By **Judith Crown**



Credit: Geoffrey Black

Eréndira Rendón

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Gonzalo Garcia arrived in Chicago from Mexico 30 years ago and has worked, paid taxes and raised a family. He's also undocumented. And he can't help but be incensed when he sees a new wave of immigrants arrive with a path to obtain a work permit and, potentially, to citizenship.

"I think about how difficult my life was, especially in the beginning, without having that work permit," Garcia says in Spanish through a translator. "It's sad to see that we are not being

awarded anything.”

The migrant crisis has brought to light inequality in the way immigrants are treated. Members of the city’s undocumented Latino community like Garcia are angry when they see newly arrived immigrants



from Venezuela able to obtain work permits, which gives them access to better-paying jobs.

Other communities are infuriated, too, pointing out that public funding to shelter and feed migrants is money that might otherwise be used to further address the city’s daunting social problems, such as homelessness, mental illness and poverty. How is it that new arrivals are assigned to city shelters while there are tent camps in Humboldt Park and Columbus Park and along the Eisenhower Expressway?

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“The immigration system is not equitable,” says Jose M. Muñoz, executive director of La Casa Norte, which serves youth confronting homelessness. “It never has been.”

Federal immigration rules reflect a response to world crises, so the outcomes often appear arbitrary and inconsistent. Refugees from Ukraine received parole, a status that enabled them to fly in and apply for work permits. There are no blanket protections for migrants from Venezuela. Those who arrived before July 31, 2023, can apply for a status that protects them from deportation and enables them to obtain a work permit. But migrants who arrived in August or later face a more difficult path. The federal government has extended some protections to refugees amassing at the Southern border — not just from Venezuela, but also from Nicaragua, Haiti and Cuba.

Incumbent undocumented workers don't begrudge work permits and services for the newer arrivals, says Eréndira "Ere" Rendón, vice president of immigrant justice at The Resurrection Project, a nonprofit. "Our ask is, we deserve it, too," she says. "Why can't we apply for parole? Why don't we get work permits?"

There's also anger directed at the federal government for not picking up the funding slack. The state of Illinois has provided or committed more than \$600 million to migrant care, including direct funding to the city of Chicago. The city spent more than \$275 million last year, drawing from a mix of federal, state and local funding. It budgeted \$150 million for this year, but hopes to land more federal and state dollars, a city spokesman says.

"This is money we're forced to use because of a federal emergency," says Ald. William Hall, 6th. "The federal government needs to step up, otherwise it will break metropolitan cities and suburbs," he adds.

The inequity riles Hall's South Side constituents. "They're saying, 'How are you finding \$50 million for migrants, and you couldn't come up with \$50 million when the schools closed (10 years ago)?' " he says.

A divide across immigrant communities

An estimated three-quarters of the 34,000 migrants who have landed in Chicago since August 2022 are from Venezuela.

Not all have a path to obtain a work permit, but some do. If they arrived before July 31, 2023, they were afforded temporary protected status, or TPS, which enables them to live and work in the U.S. legally. A smaller number may have been approved for parole before entering.

The Resurrection Project, which works with government agencies in assisting migrants, estimates that of the more than 15,000 migrants in shelters, roughly 3,500 are eligible for permits. As of mid-January, more than 950 received work authorizations through the nonprofit's help, although the U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services has approved 1,800, Rendón says. Migrants also are getting help from other organizations.

Most Venezuelans crossing the border since July 31, experts say, are asylum-seekers who are protected by international law. They have a year to apply for asylum and can apply for a work permit 150 days after their application is filed. There's no assurance that migrants in the end will win their cases, which are decided based on a seeker's particular circumstances. What is certain

is that the process moves slowly as the administrative system and courts are exceedingly backlogged, immigration experts say.

That recent immigrants have a path to work permits irks undocumented Chicagoans from Mexico who have worked in the shadows for years, if not decades. "We hear they can't work because they don't have a permit," Rendón says. "We've done it forever." Undocumented immigrants traditionally have found work in factories, restaurants, health care, and doing domestic and landscape work.

The big difference is that the new immigrants aren't hiding. They cross the border and declare to U.S. Customs & Border Protection officials their intention to seek asylum. In contrast, many Mexican immigrants arrived undetected or overstayed a visa in what is now regarded as "unlawful presence." Rendón's family arrived from Mexico with no money and few personal belongings. "We couldn't ask for help because we were undocumented," she says. "You don't tell the government you're here."

The discrepancy in treatment also upsets U.S. citizens who are married to undocumented spouses. "To see new arrivals automatically getting TPS, parole or work authorization — the protection our spouses have not had — it's a slap in the face," says Ashley DeAzevedo, president of Philadelphia-based American Families United, a nonprofit that seeks legislative protections for families where a spouse is vulnerable to detention or deportation.

U.S. citizens often try to sponsor a spouse for citizenship but run into roadblocks, either because they crossed into the U.S. illegally years ago or signed, perhaps inadvertently, paperwork claiming to be a U.S. citizen. American Families United hopes to extend a rule that offers parole to undocumented members of military families to all undocumented spouses of U.S. citizens.

"People are missing how separate the new immigrant community is from the long-term immigrant communities," says Megan, a social service worker from Waukegan who has been married to an undocumented spouse from Mexico for 20 years and asked that her full name not be published. "There is a divide."

Businesses represented by the Chicago-based American Business Immigration Coalition are advocating for an expansion of work permits for long-term undocumented residents. The coalition represents 1,400 businesses and business associations nationally.

In Illinois, the coalition counts heavy hitters in its leadership, including Craig Duchossois, executive chair of The Duchossois Group; industrialist Lester Crown; Mellody Hobson, co-CEO

of Ariel Investments; former U.S. Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker; and Ellen Rudnick, senior adviser on entrepreneurship at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business.

The organization has sought comprehensive immigration reform in Congress. But because that's politically a remote possibility, the coalition is focusing on administrative action that would expand work permits for the long-term undocumented, says American Business Immigration Coalition Executive Director Rebecca Shi.

Undocumented workers who have been here feel slighted that Venezuelans are getting work permits that they cannot get, says Sam Toia, president of the Illinois Restaurant Association.

The association wants undocumented workers who have been in the U.S. to gain the same access to work permits, and there's a good business reason, he says. With unemployment below 4%, restaurants are hungry for workers. Dishwashers are starting at \$18 and \$19 an hour, well above minimum wage, Toia adds.

Business leaders and immigration advocacy organizations have urged President Biden to provide work permits and expand humanitarian parole, especially in light of labor shortages in several industries. But the White House has gone radio silent, even with requests for meetings from the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and the Congressional Progressive Caucus, says U.S. Rep. Jesus "Chuy" Garcia, D-Ill. "That's troubling," he says.

He's among lawmakers seeking more federal support for the migrant crisis. Federal resources are concentrated at the Southern border but haven't followed migrants on their journeys to Chicago and other large cities that have accommodated them — a particular challenge in the dead of winter. "The level of support for Chicago, New York, Denver and Houston is totally inadequate," Garcia says. "That's exacerbating the tensions in the immigrant community and with other communities as well."

As of late January, the prospect of a bipartisan deal that would have tightened the border but also added resources to aid migrants already here was in jeopardy. The Biden administration was seeking \$1 billion in grants to local governments and nonprofits for temporary food, shelter and other services, as well as more officers to speed the issuance of work authorization documents. The immigration reform package, in turn, was being linked to aid for Ukraine and Israel. Those fragile talks were torpedoed last month by former President Donald Trump, who is adopting immigration as a cornerstone of his campaign to win a second term.

Questions of sustainability and equity

In the absence of federal dollars, Illinois, Cook County and Chicago have reallocated money for shelters, food, transportation, medical assistance and legal support for incoming migrants. Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson tapped \$95 million in federal COVID-19 funds to shelter migrants. Illinois has offered services for victims of terrorism and trafficking, and last year extended six months of rental assistance for migrants going through Chicago's shelter program, although that was reduced to three months in November.

Could the hundreds of millions of dollars being funneled to migrant care be better used to focus on long-term problems like addiction, mental illness and homelessness?

In Oak Park, village board member Cory Wesley questioned the spending of \$300,000 per month to shelter and support 162 asylum-seekers who were brought to the village by volunteers and activists who saw them shivering outside a police station in the Austin neighborhood.

That translated to more than \$2,000 a month per person, Wesley noted at a village board meeting in November. Universal basic income programs pay people in poverty \$500 or, at most, \$1,000 a month, he said. "I don't see how it's sustainable, and I definitely don't see how it's equitable," he said.

The lack of investment in our Black communities is still a reality," says Oak Park Village President Vicki Scaman. She says it's no wonder that people are cynical, watching local governments spend hundreds of millions for migrants and what feels like leftovers being allocated to support those who are homeless and others in need. Still, the role of a municipality is to keep people safe. "In a practical way, we can't ignore hundreds of people who don't have a place to sleep except outdoors," Scaman says.

Although Chicago residents grumble about the amount of resources being spent, the idea that the city isn't helping people because of the migrant crisis is not true, says 6th Ward Ald. Hall. Much of the funding for migrants comes from the state, which couldn't be repurposed for city services.


One bright spot: The Black- and women-owned Hyde Park Caribbean restaurant 14 Parish recently received a yearlong multimillion-dollar city contract to supply meals to 7,000 migrants in South and West Side shelters. That's a breakthrough, Hall says, adding, "When you think of crises like Hurricane Katrina, there were no opportunities for minorities whose neighborhoods were impacted to participate in rebuilding."

While tent camps are a visible reminder of the disparate ways federal, state and local government addresses emergencies and social needs, there is help available for unhoused people, Hall says, pointing to the Chicago Department of Family & Support Services and nonprofits such as the Night Ministry and La Casa Norte.

Some of the unhoused may initially refuse help, says Lynda Schueler, CEO of Housing Forward, which serves homeless people in the western suburbs. They may be suffering mental illness, addiction, loss of a job or a family member, she says. And it may take weeks or months for a skilled case worker to convince a person in a tent camp to accept services. Helping migrants is a more straightforward process, with emergency housing and food, followed by help in school enrollment, legal advice and health care.

“We’re seeing an unprecedented focus on the unhoused,” says Muñoz of La Casa Norte. “But we’re still not investing in social services to the point where we can eliminate homelessness.” The crisis has shown that government can react quickly to address an emergency with specific services within a prescribed timeline. “When the political will exists to end homelessness, it will happen,” he says.

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Commentary: Asylum-seekers, marginalized communities both victims of negligence by policymakers

Deeper, long-standing problems can't be blamed on new arrivals, writes the executive director of Alianza Americas.

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