POLICY BRIEF

STRENGTHENING HOMELESSNESS RESPONSE SYSTEMS FOR IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Immigrants experiencing homelessness face a unique and growing set of barriers to accessing housing and service supports. These challenges are particularly acute for undocumented individuals and mixed-status families, who often encounter legal, administrative, and trust-related obstacles that limit access to critical services.

Recent shifts in federal immigration policy and increased immigration enforcement activity have intensified long-standing challenges. Fear of immigration enforcement is discouraging many immigrants from accessing critical services. Among immigrants experiencing unsheltered homelessness, these fears are also contributing to relocation to remote and difficult-to-reach areas, complicating outreach efforts and requiring additional resources to maintain service engagement. At the same time, homeless service providers are navigating rapidly changing federal immigration policies, uncertainty regarding documentation requirements and eligibility rules for services, and growing concerns regarding privacy and data protections for vulnerable populations. Together, these heightened fears and disruptions are likely to have a chilling effect that extends beyond the current administration.

With immigrants comprising more than one-quarter of California's population and millions of residents living in mixed-status households, ensuring equitable access to homeless services is essential to the effectiveness of the state's overall homelessness response system. This brief outlines policy recommendations at the state level designed to strengthen service access, improve system coordination, ensure legal protections, and build the capacity of homeless providers to meet the needs of immigrant communities experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

BACKGROUND

California's homelessness response system is facing growing challenges as expanded federal immigration enforcement increases economic insecurity and deters many immigrant households from accessing housing and homeless services. Immigrants make up 28% of California's population, the highest share of any state in the country.[1] An estimated 2.28 million undocumented immigrants live in California, representing approximately 8% of the state's workforce.[2] As a critical part of the state's labor force, immigrants and their families are particularly vulnerable to the economic consequences of immigration enforcement. Following immigration raids, California experienced a 3.1% decline in private-sector workforce attendance.[3] Research estimates that the loss of an undocumented household member's income can reduce median household income from $75,500 to $39,000, pushing families further into poverty.[4] More than 3.3 million Californians,[5] including U.S. citizens and lawful residents, live in mixed-status families with undocumented immigrants, leaving manyvulnerable to income shocks. As immigration enforcement intensifies, California must ensure that all individuals and families can access critical emergency services.

Even before increases in federal immigration enforcement, many immigrants faced long-standing structural barriers that heightened their vulnerability to housing instability. Immigrant workers are disproportionately represented in low-wage and informal employment sectors with limited workplace protections, unstable income, and few benefits. At the same time, many immigrants are ineligible for federally funded safety net programs that help prevent homelessness during periods of economic hardship. Additional barriers, including limited English proficiency, lack of familiarity with available services, and difficulties obtaining documents required for public benefits, further restrict support. The chilling effects of previous periods of heightened immigration enforcement also discourage many immigrants from seeking services.

Recent federal policy changes have substantially expanded both the scale and reach of immigration enforcement. Congress approved nearly $75 billion in new federal funding for immigration enforcement,[6] the largest investment in Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) history. At the same time, the erosion of long-standing "sensitive area" protections, which historically limited enforcement actions at places such as schools, hospitals, and shelters, has increased the likelihood that immigration enforcement may occur in spaces previously considered off-limits.[7] Coupled with the growing use of federal funding as a policy lever, these changes have intensified fear among immigrant communities, reducing engagement with essential services and creating new operational, legal, and ethical challenges for California's homelessness response system.

[1] Marisol Cuellar Mejia and Hans Johnson, "Immigrants in California," Public Policy Institute of California, January 2026, https://www.ppic.org/wp-content/uploads/jtf-immigrants-in-california.pdf.
[2] Bay Area Council Economic Institute and University of California, Merced, "The Economic Impact of Mass Deportation in California," Bay Area Council Economic Institute, June 2025, https://www.bayareaeconomy.org/files/pdf/Economic%20Impact%20of%20Mass%20Deportation_June%202025.pdf.
[3] Edward Orozco Flores, Quy Lam, and Jennifer Elena Cossyleon, "The Effects of Recent Federal Immigration Enforcement on Private Sector Employment in California and Washington, D.C.," UC Merced Community and Labor Center, November 2025, https://clc.ucmerced.edu/sites/g/files/ufvvjh626/f/page/documents/effects_of_federal_immigration_enforcement_nov_2025.pdf.
[4] Matthew Lisiecki and Gerard Apruzzese, "Proposed 2024 Mass Deportation Program Would Socially and Economically Devastate American Families," Center for Migration Studies of New York (CMS), October 10, 2024, https://cmsny.org/publications/2024-mass-deportation-program-devastate-american-families-101024/.
[5] California Immigrant Data Portal, "Mixed-status Families," 2023, https://www.immigrantdataca.org/indicators/mixed-status-families.
[6] Congressional Research Service, "Understanding the FY2026 DHS Budget Request," CRS Report R48704, September 5, 2025, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/HTML/R48704.html.
[7] American Immigration Lawyers Association, "DHS Rescinds Guidelines for Enforcement Actions in or near Protected Areas and Issues Directive on Humanitarian Parole," January 21, 2025, https://www.aila.org/library/dhs-rescinds-guidelines-for-enforcement-actions-in-or-near-protected-areas-and-issues-directive-on-humanitarian-parole.

Homeless service providers and local governments are increasingly tasked with responding to these challenges despite limited resources, insufficient legal guidance, and an inadequate infrastructure to support immigrant populations. California's homelessness response system needs coordinated state action to ensure that federal immigration enforcement does not undermine access to essential housing and homeless services. The recommendations that follow identify practical policy and operational strategies to support providers, protect vulnerable communities, and promote equitable access to critical housing and homeless services for all Californians regardless of immigration status.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish an Immigrant-Inclusive Homelessness Response System

Immigration status, language barriers, and fear of enforcement should not prevent individuals and families from accessing shelter, housing, healthcare, or other essential services. California should invest in a homelessness response system that is culturally responsive, linguistically accessible, and equipped to meet the needs of immigrant communities.

Policy actions include:

- Establish an immigrant affairs unit within the California Housing and Homelessness Agency (CHHA), including dedicated staffing responsible for coordinating statewide policies affecting immigrants' access to housing and homeless services. Unit leadership should serve on the California Interagency Council on Homelessness. Unit staff would be charged with developing guidance for providers, coordinating cross-agency collaboration, monitoring emerging federal policy changes, and ensuring that homelessness response systems remain accessible to all Californians regardless of immigration status.
  Increase ongoing state level funding and encourage targeted hiring of staff that can provide culturally and linguistically responsive outreach, housing navigation, and intensive case management for immigrants experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Funding should include state level guidance on bilingual pay differentials for staff who use language skills in the delivery of services.

- Expand the existing Medi-Cal Community Health Worker (CHW) benefit by investing in training and reimbursement for promotores and other trusted CHWs to undertake homelessness outreach and engagement. The model should emphasize collaboration with community organizations that can identify individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness that remain disconnected from health care, housing, and homeless services.

- Affirm that state funded programs such as California's Homeless Housing, Assistance and Prevention (HHAP) Grant Program are open to all Californians. Provide clear guidance on what resources can be accessed by all and the percentage of state prevention and housing funds that must be set aside, not weaved with federal dollars, to maintain accessibility regardless of an individual's immigration status.

- Provide dedicated funding to support partnerships among homeless service providers, immigrant-serving organizations, and legal aid providers. State investments should support local partnerships that improve coordination and reduce fragmentation.

2. Strengthen Statewide Partnerships with Consulates

Consulates are important but underutilized partners in supporting immigrants experiencing homelessness. Strengthening relationships between homeless service systems and foreign governments can improve access to documentation and emergency assistance.

Policy actions include:

- Designate a liaison within the CHHA to coordinate with California's Office of International Affairs (OIA) on statewide engagement with consulates. A statewide consular engagement strategy should:
  - Convene regular meetings between state agencies and major foreign consulates.
  - Develop memoranda of understandings (MOUs) to clarify roles and improve collaboration and coordination.
  - Create guidance for local homelessness systems on engaging with consular offices.
  - Facilitate information sharing on how to obtain documents needed for public benefits (e.g., birth certificates, passports, national identity cards) and how to access available consular resources.

3. Strengthen Homeless Services' Safety Infrastructure

Providers often operate in aging facilities with deferred maintenance and outdated technology systems, creating safety risks and increasing vulnerability to unauthorized facility access and data breaches. In addition, rising costs for private security services are impacting provider budgets and have contributed to reductions in staff and client safety. Local homelessness response systems need flexible resources to address infrastructure gaps and enhance on-site security.

Policy actions include:

- Create a dedicated fund to help homeless service providers address aging facilities and deferred maintenance. Grants should support critical physical improvements, including structural repairs, accessibility, and renovations, that enhance the safety and functionality of facilities serving people experiencing homelessness.

- Enhance HHAP funding to provide dedicated resources for on-site safety and security needs at shelters, interim housing, and permanent supportive housing facilities. Eligible costs could include on-site security, safety monitors, overnight coverage, and related training and safety measures.

4. Strengthen Legal Support and Confidentiality Protections

Rapidly changing federal immigration policies create uncertainty and fear for immigrant households and the organizations that serve them. Service providers need ongoing legal guidance to understand and respond to policy changes, while immigrants need access to legal assistance that helps them safely access public resources. At the same time, concerns that personal information may be shared with immigration authorities can discourage immigrants from seeking assistance and erode trust in public systems. California should strengthen statewide confidentiality protections and invest in accessible legal resources for both service providers and immigrant communities to help ensure that people can safely access services.

Policy actions include:

- Provide ongoing training, technical assistance, Know Your Rights education, and legal preparedness resources for homeless service providers responding to immigration enforcement.
- Establish sustained funding for legal services that assist immigrants and homeless service providers in navigating changing federal immigration policies. This can be done by designating state level resources for embedded legal aid partnerships within homelessness response systems.
- Establish statewide guidance governing data collection, retention, and information sharing within homelessness response systems. Require privacy standards that minimize unnecessary collection of immigration-related information and establish clear limits on data sharing.
- Develop best practices for local homeless service systems to protect client confidentiality. Subsequently, provide technical assistance to providers on privacy protections and client communications.

5. Prevent the Criminalization of Homelessness

Policies that criminalize homelessness or increase enforcement around service settings can further marginalize vulnerable populations and reduce access to care. Immigrant individuals experiencing homelessness may be especially vulnerable to avoiding outreach, shelter, and public spaces when enforcement-based responses are prioritized. California should support housing, outreach, and supportive services over punitive approaches.

Policy actions include:

- Ensure that local enforcement practices do not interfere with access to shelter, outreach, healthcare, legal services, or other humanitarian assistance.
- Protect outreach workers, mutual aid organizations, and humanitarian service providers from policies that impede their ability to serve unhoused immigrant individuals.
- Continue investing in housing, prevention, and supportive services rather than punitive enforcement responses.

CONCLUSION

Immigrant communities experiencing homelessness face intersecting barriers that require coordinated and sustained policy responses. California has an opportunity to strengthen its homelessness response system by ensuring that immigration status does not become a barrier to safety, shelter, and housing stability. A coordinated statewide approach—focused on access, trust, legal preparedness, and provider capacity—will improve outcomes for immigrant communities while strengthening homelessness response systems for all Californians.

Unseen.

Unseen is a non-profit initiative that works to support communities too often written out of the American story.