



# Addressing Disaster Disparities in Migrant Communities

*Spring 2024 Workshop*

## Background

Throughout the United States, disasters have increased in frequency and severity. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the U.S. experienced 28 weather and climate-related disasters costing at least 1 billion dollars each in 2023 – marking 2023 with the highest number of billion-dollar disasters in a calendar year.<sup>1</sup> These disasters included historic winter flooding in California and tornado outbreaks across the central U.S., among others. In addition to the extensive economic damage, natural disasters lead to displacement, public and

mental health impacts, and decreased financial security, compounding the challenges affected populations face, which impedes long-term recovery efforts.

Despite common assertions that “disasters don’t discriminate,” research shows that climate-induced disasters exacerbate existing social inequities and disproportionately harm disadvantaged populations.<sup>2</sup> Migrants, in particular, are especially vulnerable to the effects of disasters due to their socioeconomic and immigration statuses. Migrant populations

experience structural inequalities via racial discrimination, economic hardship, limited English proficiency, labor exploitation, fear of deportation, and other disparities. These disparities have significant impacts on the health and well-being of migrants. For example, in California, 20% of undocumented children live in poverty,<sup>3</sup> and 73% of undocumented migrants have unmet mental health care needs.<sup>4</sup> For migrants and undocumented individuals, these pre-existing inequalities influence the ability to prepare for and recover from disasters.

With climate-induced disasters increasing, it is critical for decision-makers to understand

and address the disproportionate vulnerabilities of undocumented migrant communities. This issue is particularly salient for the state of California, which is home to over 10 million migrants, comprising 27% of the state's population—the highest share of any state in the U.S.<sup>5</sup> There are an estimated 2.7 million undocumented individuals living in the state, including approximately 1.7 million undocumented workers.<sup>6</sup> These workers make up ~6% of the state's workforce and contribute \$3.7 billion in local and state tax revenue.<sup>7</sup> Despite their key role in California's economy, undocumented individuals are often excluded from government safety net programs like unemployment and disaster relief.

## Event Overview

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On May 8th, 2024, the *Addressing Disaster Disparities in Migrant Communities Workshop* brought together civil society actors from across California to share their perspectives and experiences of how climate-induced disasters are affecting undocumented migrants. The workshop was hosted by Dr. Michael Méndez and Dr. Belinda Campos from UC Irvine, and generously funded by the UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Institute's *Diversity in Academia Award*. The event was held at the Beckman Center of the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering & Medicine. In attendance were nearly 50 key stakeholders from community-based organizations (CBOs), philanthropic foundations, academic institutions, government agencies, and federal, state, and local policymakers. CBO participants represented migrant-serving organizations from across California that focus on various issues including immigration rights, farmworker labor, social services, health, and education. The goal of the workshop was to create a space for these diverse stakeholders to learn from one another, build connections, and begin to develop a path forward to address disaster disparities in undocumented communities.

Throughout the course of the workshop, stakeholder participants raised several themes that highlighted the hardships posed by disaster disparities. Multiple participants discussed the crucial role of community-based organizations (CBOs) in disaster response and recovery, emphasizing their unique ability to address the specific needs of undocumented migrants and marginalized communities. Conversations underscored the importance of language justice, noting how culturally and linguistically relevant communication can significantly improve access to mental health resources and other emergency support during disasters. Participants also critiqued the limitations of current Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and state policies, advocating for more inclusive and culturally competent approaches. The workshop concluded with a call to substantively involve communities and CBOs in research and policy-making processes, to ensure that solutions are grounded in lived experiences and truly address the needs of the most marginalized and stigmatized populations impacted by disasters.

## SESSION 1: Keynote Presentations

### SPEAKERS



**Dr. Linda Lopez**

*Former Chief of the Office of Immigrant Affairs for Los Angeles Mayor Garcetti*



**Dr. Jeffrey Reynoso**

*Regional Director for Region 9, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS)*

The workshop commenced with presentations from two keynote speakers who have extensive experience working in federal, state, and local governments. Dr. Linda Lopez has more than 20 years of experience in government, philanthropy, and academia, and she served as the inaugural Chief of the Office of Immigrant Affairs for Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti in his senior leadership team. Dr. Jeffrey Reynoso currently serves as a Regional Director in the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS), and he has worked on health equity and social justice issues spanning academia, government, and non-profit sectors for over a decade. Together, their presentations offered an overview of the systemic challenges and innovative solutions addressing disaster disparities in undocumented migrant communities.

In her keynote, Dr. Linda Lopez highlighted the profound impact of disasters, such as COVID-19, on undocumented migrants, sharing both personal experiences and professional insights. She recounted the fear and uncertainty at the pandemic's onset and her swift collaboration with colleagues to support those excluded from federal relief efforts. Dr. Lopez emphasized that crises present opportunities for cooperation and rapid action, as exemplified by the development of collaborative efforts to

provide immediate financial relief to migrant communities during the pandemic. She praised community-based organizations (CBOs) as the true first responders, having already established trust within these communities. Dr. Lopez discussed her research on the social determinants of health during COVID-19, involving interviews with 120 immigrant families across the U.S. From this work, the top needs identified were mental health support, immigration status resolution to alleviate deportation fears, and improved workforce, economic, and educational opportunities. She stressed the importance of directly engaging with families to understand their struggles and the lack of support they face, and she reiterated the critical role of CBOs, foundations, and non-profits in all aspects of disaster preparedness, response, and management.

“Building trust in the community is one of the most important parts of developing a policy, a program, or an initiative.”

– Dr. Linda Lopez

Dr. Jeffrey Reynoso outlined HHS's strategic priorities under Secretary Becerra's vision of making health care a right, rather than a privilege. Emphasizing health equity, HHS aims to transition from an illness-care system to a wellness-care system.

Highlighting the critical role of language access, Dr. Reynoso noted how COVID-19 underscored the need for multilingual resources, leading to each HHS division now having a language access coordinator. Environmental justice (EJ) efforts are also prioritized, with HHS implementing Justice 40 initiatives and mobilizing resources to help local communities address environmental health disparities. New offices within HHS, such as the Office of Environmental Justice and the Office of Climate Change and Health Equity, exemplify structural changes aimed at addressing inequities, although these are currently funded through annual budgets rather than Congress. Dr. Reynoso also acknowledged the importance of protecting farmworkers—who are more likely to be racial/ethnic minorities and non-English speakers—especially as climate change increases the frequency and severity of extreme heat and wildfires. HHS supports farmworker health through research, services, and training, with a personal commitment from Secretary Becerra, who has roots in Sacramento's farmworker community. As part of HHS's

efforts to support farmworker health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) had an opportunity for the public to provide information about the hazards of wildfire smoke to outdoor workers. Dr. Reynoso encouraged all of the workshop attendees to provide public comments to help inform a process to develop occupational health protections for farmworkers. Dr. Reynoso also called attention to resources for migrant communities including the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), which is now accessible to mixed-status homes, and a recent expansion of healthcare access for DACA recipients. Overall, his keynote highlighted HHS's ongoing commitments to environmental justice and health equity initiatives.

“We saw CBOs step up to address the linguistic and cultural needs so that we could get information out to communities about COVID-19.” – Dr. Jeffrey Reynoso

## Session 1: Key Insights

Together, these keynote presentations highlight the multifaceted challenges undocumented migrant communities face during disasters and the importance of inclusive, empathetic, and equitable approaches to policy and support systems.

**Migrant serving organizations as first responders:** CBOs that have built trust and relationships with undocumented communities are often the first to respond in disasters and emergencies.

**Learn from lived experiences:** listening to narratives and stories from those who have lived through disaster and inequity is one of the most powerful ways to understand the realities of disaster disparities in undocumented communities.

**Co-creation of research and policy:** given their experiences, CBOs and impacted individuals should have a role in the development of policy solutions.

**Prioritizing health equity:** HHS aims to transform healthcare from an illness-care system to a wellness-care system. The department is working to create structural changes to address inequities, including those related to climate-induced disasters, like extreme wildfires.

**Expanding language access:** disasters have highlighted the importance of having resources in multiple languages, and CBOs have stepped up to provide translation services that are linguistically and culturally appropriate. Now, HHS has a language access coordinator in every division.

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## SESSION 2:

### Overview of Disaster Impacts to Undocumented Migrants

To illustrate the effects of disasters on undocumented migrants, the first panel provided an overview of the various health, socioeconomic, and access issues that undocumented individuals and families face during and after disasters. Speakers shared their personal and professional experiences, highlighted the particular disaster considerations and needs in undocumented communities, and provided key insights and recommendations for more equitable disaster planning and programming.

Ángela Gutiérrez emphasized the **severe mental health crisis among undocumented migrants**, which is exacerbated by rising anti-immigrant rhetoric and exacerbated by disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate-induced disasters. Her research highlighted a 71% increase in severe psychological distress among undocumented migrants between 2015 and 2021. She called for expanding access to affordable, culturally appropriate mental health care and leveraging community cultural wealth to break down barriers to relief.

Daniel Torres, reflecting on his experience coming from a farmworker family and now working as a senior state government official, discussed the **critical importance of trust and relationship-building in disaster response**. He noted that many Latinos avoid government-sponsored evacuation and relief

## Speakers

**Ángela Gutiérrez, PhD, MPH**  
Associate Professor at Western University of Health Sciences

**Max Bell Alper**  
Executive Director,  
North Bay Jobs with Justice

**Daniel Torres**  
Chief Equity Officer, California Health & Human Services (CalHHS), and Former CA State Director of Immigrant Integration

**Primitiva Hernandez**  
Executive Director, 805 UndocuFund

**Dr. Belinda Campos (Panel Moderator)**  
Professor and Chair,  
Chicano/Latino Studies, UC Irvine

centers due to mistrust. However, he found that when trusted CBOs hosted the disaster relief, programs were more successful in reaching Latinos. Torres advocated for greater collaboration between local governments, CBOs, and philanthropic organizations to deliver disaster aid effectively.

Primitiva Hernandez outlined the **significant role of CBOs in providing disaster relief to undocumented communities**. Since 2018, 805 UndocuFund has dispersed over \$8 million in aid. However, she stressed that



Panel participants: Belinda Campos (panel moderator), Ángela Gutiérrez, Max Bell Alper, Daniel Torres, Primitiva Hernandez

philanthropy alone cannot fill the gap left by insufficient government support. Hernandez called for systemic changes to ensure government resources are allocated to undocumented communities and highlighted the success of the California Undocufund Network (a coalition of over 40 migrant serving organizations providing disaster mutual aid) in advocating for immigrant rights in disaster policies. She also **discussed the limitations of FEMA disaster aid**, explaining that while FEMA may have funding for some migrant communities, they rely heavily on local jurisdictions to develop response plans and deploy resources. However, this process often excludes migrant-serving organizations.

Max Bell Alper highlighted the **economic vulnerabilities of undocumented workers**, particularly farmworkers, who continue to work in hazardous conditions without adequate protections or compensation during disasters. He **emphasized the importance of language justice**, as many workers speak Indigenous languages and need disaster information in their native dialects. Alper discussed initiatives like hazard pay and compensation funds for undocumented workers, demonstrating that local governments can play a crucial role alongside CBOs in supporting these communities.

## Session 2: Key Insights

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The panel underscored the multifaceted challenges faced by undocumented migrants during disasters and highlighted the importance of collaborative, inclusive, and culturally sensitive approaches to disaster response and recovery. Participants discussed the following considerations and needs within undocumented communities:

**Mental health support:** undocumented migrants are exposed to social stressors that severely impact their mental health, and a large portion of migrants have unmet mental health care needs – these are amplified when disasters hit.

**Resources in rural communities:** migrants living in rural communities face unique challenges due to under-resourced CBOs and limited infrastructure for disaster assistance.

**Expanding language access:** disaster information should be available in Spanish, but also in Indigenous languages and other non-English languages to ensure effective communication.

**Addressing economic security:** addressing economic disparities through initiatives like hazard pay and compensation funds is necessary to support undocumented workers during crises.

**CBOs as trusted messengers:** building trust and relationships with undocumented communities through local CBOs is crucial for effective disaster response.

**Creating systemic change:** systemic change is needed to ensure government support and resources reach undocumented communities, moving beyond reliance on philanthropy and CBOs alone.

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## SESSION 3:

### Intersectional Approaches to Disaster Policies

The second panel of the workshop focused on intersectional approaches to disaster policies, emphasizing language justice, gender, indigeneity, economic equity, and vulnerability risk reduction. Speakers discussed the necessity for culturally appropriate disaster communication, training interpreters to address diverse Indigenous languages, and addressing the socioeconomic vulnerabilities of migrant farmworkers. The conversation addressed the limitations of FEMA assistance for undocumented individuals, alongside proposals for innovative solutions to protect vulnerable populations and enhance community resilience. Participants reiterated the significant role of CBOs in disaster response and advocated for systemic changes to address the needs of undocumented migrants.

Joseph Trujillo Falcon, a NOAA researcher, emphasized **the importance of language justice in disaster communication**. He highlighted the lack of standardized weather terminology across languages, which can hinder effective communication in multicultural communities. By talking directly with disaster survivors, Joseph has learned of the injustices that result from inadequate disaster communication such as migrant factory workers forced to continue working during a tornado outbreak. Even when risk communication is sent out in Spanish, there may be challenges with dialectic differences between Spanish-speaking communities – additionally, many migrants speak Indigenous languages rather than Spanish.

## Speakers

### Deborah Halberstadt

Special Advisor to the Commissioner,  
California Department of Insurance

### Joseph Trujillo Falcon

Researcher, National Oceanic and  
Atmospheric Administration

### Vanessa Teran

Mixteco/Indigena Community  
Organizing Project (MICOP)

### Genesis Ek

Administrative Director of  
Comunidades Indigenas en Liderazgo  
(CIELO)

### Eduardo Garcia

Assembly Member, Chair of the  
Assembly Environmental Safety and  
Toxic Materials

### Dr. Michael Méndez (Panel Moderator)

Assistant Professor, Urban Planning  
and Public Policy, UC Irvine

Also speaking to issues of language justice, Genesis Ek discussed CIELO's work training interpreters to culturally adapt **translations for diverse languages spoken in Indigenous communities**. Genesis has found that a common justification for limited language resources is a lack of data on Indigenous languages and speakers. Through focus groups and data collection, CIELO has identified over 11,000 Indigenous language speakers in the LA area with at least 60 distinct languages, stressing the **importance of not homogenizing migrant populations**. Genesis also spoke about the ways in which CBOs have had to shift their focus and priorities in the wake of disasters to meet the needs of migrant communities.



Panel participants: Michael Méndez (panel moderator), Joseph Trujillo Falcon, Vanessa Teran, Deborah Halberstadt, Genesis Ek

Deborah Halberstadt, Special Advisor to California's Insurance Commissioner, spoke about her work at the intersection of inclusive insurance and biodiversity. Deborah highlighted the ways that **insurance can be used as a tool to build community resilience** and shared some of the innovative solutions the Department of Insurance is piloting. She provided an example of one of these potential programs: insurance that would cover street vendors during extreme heat, providing benefits for outdoor workers who are unable to work due to extreme or dangerous temperatures. Deborah also brought attention to **the need to reduce the risk that undocumented migrants face due to disasters**, which would in turn decrease the need for risk transfer mechanisms like insurance. Risk reduction can be achieved by investing in nature-based solutions such as salt marsh restoration for flood protection and urban forestry for heat protection in the most disadvantaged communities.

Vanessa Teran from MICOP highlighted the economic disparities faced by Indigenous farmworkers, who do not benefit from the agricultural wealth they produce. Vanessa addressed the **limitations of FEMA's disaster aid**—from its exclusion of undocumented migrants to its restrictions on disaster designation—and emphasized the need for a reevaluation of these requirements. They explained MICOP's work advocating for living wages for farmworkers and highlighted the **undocumented community's fear of accessing social programs** due to immigration status concerns. Vanessa also brought attention to inequities within social assistance programs – despite undocumented workers contributing approximately \$485 million to unemployment funds in California, these individuals are excluded from accessing the state's social safety net.

## Session 3: Key Insights

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Panelists shared their work and advocated for systemic change, new policies, and innovative solutions to address disaster disparities faced by undocumented migrants.

**Limitations of FEMA disaster aid:** FEMA often fails to reach migrant communities due to inadequate cultural and linguistic competency, as well as restrictive disaster designation criteria and immigration status requirements. Workshop participants urged for policies to be reevaluated to ensure disaster aid is accessible to all community members, regardless of immigration status.

**Language justice and cultural awareness:** like past sessions, the panel stressed the importance of effective disaster communication that addresses diverse linguistic needs of migrant communities. Translations must be widely accessible, culturally appropriate, and contextually meaningful.

**Disaster risk reduction:** investing in nature-based solutions, such as salt marsh restoration for flood protection and urban forestry for heat reduction, is vital for reducing disaster risks in marginalized communities. These solutions help protect communities while contributing to biodiversity and environmental health, which is essential for long-term resilience against climate change and disasters.

**Critical role of CBOs:** CBOs play an essential role in disaster response, especially in immigrant communities. They have had to adapt rapidly to meet emerging needs and have been pivotal in providing services, disseminating information, and advocating for systemic changes to better support undocumented migrants and other vulnerable groups.

**Expanding the social safety net:** despite significant economic contributions to social safety nets, undocumented migrants are excluded from accessing benefits like state unemployment funds. CBOs and activists are calling for government-led disaster relief funds that support undocumented individuals, which would also reduce the burden on CBOs to provide this relief.



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## SESSION 4:

### Breakout Group Conversations

After the panel sessions, workshop attendees split up into five breakout groups with various themes. Attendees chose their breakout group according to their interests, and each group had a UCI PhD student facilitator. Several critical topics and considerations emerged from these discussions, and after the session ended, participants reconvened to share their breakout group insights with the other workshop attendees.

#### Language Access

**Language data limitations:** U.S. Census data often fails to capture the full scope of language diversity, particularly among undocumented and Indigenous communities. Localized data collection is crucial for addressing these gaps and ensuring targeted communication.

**Communicating disaster information:** utilizing multiple communication modalities (e.g. videos, radio, social media platforms like TikTok, WhatsApp, and billboards) has proven effective in reaching diverse communities. These strategies help address the varied cultural and language needs, promoting better engagement, and information dissemination among Indigenous and migrant populations.

#### Immigration Status and Disaster Aid

**Challenges with FEMA:** FEMA is often seen as the primary source of disaster relief, but its eligibility criteria and processes exclude many undocumented individuals. Even for those eligible, the assistance provided for mixed immigration status households may be minimal and not cover all necessary expenses. There is confusion for CBOs trying to understand FEMA eligibility and navigate the complex system. Participants discussed the need for developing clear and inclusive eligibility requirements, particularly for mixed-immigration status households who often fear that accepting FEMA aid will alert officials in the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE),

## Themes

### Language Access

Facilitated by Amalia Mejia,  
PhD Student

### Immigration Status and Disaster Aid

Facilitated by Carlo Chunga  
Pizzaro, PhD Student

### Worker Health and Safety Rights

Facilitated by Angelu Lescaca,  
Undergraduate Student

### Transportation, Housing, and Infrastructure

Facilitated by Sage Kime,  
PhD Student

### Mental and Public Health

Facilitated by Claudia Valencia,  
PhD Student

and place undocumented family members at risk for deportation.

**Intersectionality in disaster response:** disaster response must acknowledge and address the intersecting forms of oppression faced by migrant communities, including anti-black and Indigenous racism, xenophobia, and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals. Disaster aid should also consider the intersectionality of needs within immigrant communities. It's not just about economic relief but also addressing social, health, gender-based violence, and educational needs, especially for marginalized groups like female undocumented Indigenous workers.

**Systemic changes:** while immediate aid is crucial, there's also a need for broader systemic changes to support undocumented individuals, such as unemployment benefits, hazard pay, occupational health and safety, and tax reform. Holding policymakers accountable for addressing these issues is essential.

## Worker Health and Safety Rights

**Legal and systemic challenges:** migrant workers face legal barriers and often lack employee protections, especially in "right to work" states. Even for occupational and safety laws that do exist, there is a lack of enforcement and workers may be afraid of reporting poor conditions, particularly during or after disasters.

**Access and communication barriers:** migrant workers encounter hurdles in accessing resources due to the language barriers and the digital divide. Simplified language and bridging the digital gap are vital for equitable support.

**Community-centered solutions:** co-creating policies with affected populations, offering resources, and learning from successful advocacy models are key to empowering migrant workers and addressing their needs effectively.

## Transportation, Housing, and Infrastructure

**Disaster displacement:** disasters and resulting infrastructure changes can exacerbate inequalities, with low-income communities facing rising rents, displacement, and inadequate housing. Gentrification and the impact of infrastructure upgrades on vulnerable communities are significant concerns.

**Disaster planning and response:** local governments often lack comprehensive disaster action plans and funding mechanisms. There's a need for proactive planning, including infrastructure resilience, climate action plans, heat action plans,

disaster response strategies, and funding allocation for resilience-building measures. Exploring innovative insurance models for local governments to cover disaster response costs could incentivize proactive planning and investment in resilience measures.

## Mental and Public Health

**Addressing systemic issues:** addressing migrant mental health issues requires understanding and addressing structural factors such as discrimination, anti-immigrant rhetoric, gender-based violence, existing health disparities, and socio-economic barriers. These systemic issues significantly impact individuals' ability to access resources and support for their mental well-being.

**Cultural sensitivity in communication:** effective communication about mental health requires cultural sensitivity, including revisiting terminology to better match the emotional experiences of diverse populations. Understanding language nuances and cultural differences is crucial for effectively engaging communities and providing appropriate mental and public health support.

**Community-based research and support:** engaging communities in research and support initiatives is essential for understanding and addressing mental and public health issues effectively. Partnerships should be mutually beneficial, with researchers respecting community expertise and ensuring that findings are shared back with the community to foster empowerment and resilience.



## Conclusion

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The workshop underscored the pivotal role of CBOs in disaster response and recovery, especially within migrant and undocumented communities. Due to their community connections and trust built over time, CBOs are often the first responders and primary support systems—bridging gaps that government agencies frequently overlook. Their involvement is crucial in ensuring that disaster aid reaches those who need it most, but this responsibility should not fall solely on these organizations. Current programs and policies often fall short in supporting migrant communities, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive approach that values and incorporates the on-the-ground insights and efforts of CBOs.

The limitations of FEMA and state policies were another key focus of the discussions. These policies often fail to address the specific needs of migrant and marginalized groups, leaving significant gaps in disaster response and recovery efforts. Participants highlighted the need for policy reforms that recognize and support the unique challenges faced by these communities. This includes providing better resources and training for government staff to understand and address needs of diverse populations, as well as expanding aid eligibility to be more inclusive of migrant communities.

Language justice emerged as another critical factor in addressing disaster disparities for undocumented migrants. Participants stressed the necessity of using culturally relevant terminology and communication methods that resonate with diverse communities. This involves not only translating materials, but also understanding and incorporating the cultural nuances of language used by different populations. Effective communication is not just about language proficiency but also about cultural competence, ensuring that disaster response efforts are accessible and meaningful to all affected groups.



Workshop co-host and moderator: Dr. Michael Méndez

Finally, the importance of involving communities and CBOs in research and policy development was a recurring theme throughout the workshop. Participants emphasized that policies and research must be informed by the lived experiences of those directly affected by disasters. Involving CBOs and community members from the outset ensures that their voices and insights shape more effective and equitable disaster response strategies. Genuine partnerships and collaboration with migrant communities can lead to more tailored and impactful policies, ultimately fostering greater resilience and support for all individuals, regardless of immigration status.

The next steps involve convening a policy briefing in Sacramento, and engaging key legislative and gubernatorial stakeholders to translate insights into actionable policies. Additionally, there is a plan to commission a statewide and national poll survey of likely voters to gauge public opinion on increased protections for undocumented migrants during extreme weather events and other disasters. These initiatives aim to build broader support and drive policy changes that address the critical needs highlighted during the workshop, ensuring more inclusive and effective disaster response strategies.

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