

**Immigrants Get the Job Done: Latino Immigrants and the American Workforce  
Breakout Session - Wednesday, September 22, 2021 from 2:30 pm - 3:45 pm**

**Sponsored by:** United Food and Commercial Workers Union, Forward.us

**Moderator:** David Noriega, Correspondent for Vice News

**Opening Speakers:** Robert Menéndez, Senator of New Jersey

Linda Sánchez, Representative of California's 30th Congressional District

**Panelists:** Abel Valenzuela, Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (UCLA)

Kim Cordova, UFCW Local 7

Juan Escalante, FWD.us

As America continues efforts to put the COVID-19 pandemic behind us, immigrant workers have led the way to our nation's recovery. Immigrants account for one in six American workers and are highly represented in critical jobs like in-home health care providers and tending to our food supply chain. In this session today's leaders in the public and private sectors discuss how smarter policies and inclusive practices can advance the immigrant workforce.

Senator Robert Menéndez opened the session by acknowledging the unfair burden Latinos endured during the pandemic by way of loss of life and livelihood. The pandemic shed a light to the vital contributions of the Latino community by providing essential services during this difficult and trying time. He issued a call to action to honor the sacrifices of the community by providing a pathway for our members to gain equal rights through immigration reform.

Congresswoman Linda Sánchez, representative of California's 30th Congressional District. She illustrated the importance of immigrants in the economy and their collective positive contributions. Rep. Sánchez promised her continued commitment in working towards a more equitable and continuous immigration reform to empower the Latino community. Empowering our the Latinx will contribute 1.7 trillion dollars towards the economy.

David Noriega, Correspondent for Vice News, moderated the panel discussion and was joined by experts Abel Valenzuela, Kim Cordova, and Juan Escalante. The conversation covered a wide range of topics including the importance of latinos as essential workers, the need of a pathway to citizenship, among many other policy concerns.

**The pandemic exposed inequities of working conditions of essential workers:**

The pandemic shed a bright spotlight on the immense inequity of the working conditions of essential workers. Without the layers of day-to-day business, their working conditions came into focus for all to see. Rather than just honoring these hard workers by calling them heroes, rightfully so, however, what they really need is fair and just rights workers rights. Abel Valenzuela emphasized the importance of that window of opportunity, "it would have been an impactful time to capitalize on those sentiments to drive change in legislation to improve the working conditions of essential workers." Juan Escalante added to this sentiment by adding another layer of inequity for essential workers; he mentioned accessibility to their place of

employment as being another obstacle. Kim Cordova pointed out that at the beginning of the pandemic, the economy was prioritized at the expense of the safety and health of essential workers. She said, “most of these workers do not get paid when they do not work and are therefore forced to work without proper PP.” She also mentioned the dismantling of OSHA during the previous administration further pushed the safety of the essential workers to dangerous levels.

### **What does a fair and just living wage mean?**

Kim Cordova highlighted that the living wage covers much more than just salary. The salary itself should be enough to support a family’s basic needs. It should also include paid time off and affordable health care for themselves and their families. Juan Escalante further elaborates that minimum wage is not one size fits all for all the states and believes the systemic infrastructure of the employees' location should be considered in establishing a minimum wage. The panel also discussed how states should take on what other big cities are doing to provide subsidized transportation, which enables workers to easily get to and from their work.

### **What statewide policies can the Federal Government use as a model to implement as national policy for immigrant labor?**

Kim Cordova expressed an immediate need for just and fair treatment of essential workers. They are entitled to have livable wage-wages that will be enough to provide basic support for their families. They are entitled to paid sick leave and affordable health care. These are basic needs that essential workers are missing and that’s why they need union representation.

Abel Valenzuela emphasized the importance of educating students on “how much one actually needs to meet one’s basic needs”. He cites California’s \$15/hr minimum wage as a benchmark on how legislation can affect a worker's standard of living.

Juan Escalante further emphasized Kim Cordova’s point concerning livable wage. Each state has its own metrics of living expenses and wages needed to complement those norms for fairness.