



## Essential but excluded: Farmworkers face healthcare hurdles

*Dispatcher: 911, what's your emergency?*

*Caller: America's healthcare system is broken and people are dying!  
(ambulance siren)*

Welcome to **Code WACK!**, where we shine a light on America's callous healthcare system, how it hurts us and what we can do about it. I'm your host **Brenda Gazzar**. This time on **Code WACK!** Undocumented workers in California contribute about \$3.7 billion state and local taxes each year. They hold one in 16 jobs in the state. What challenges do they face when it comes to getting access to quality health care? How is this impacting their health and our communities? To find out, we spoke to **Luz Gallegos**, executive director of **TODEC Legal Center** in Southern California's Inland Empire. The nonprofit mobilizes immigrant communities to build political power and demand justice while advocating for their most critical needs – from improved schools and better jobs to expanding access to medical coverage and legal protections. Luz has marched alongside immigrant rights' leaders such as Bert Corona, Soledad 'Chole' Alatorre, and Cesar Chavez.

**Welcome to Code WACK! Luz!**

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**Gallegos:** Hi, thank you for the invitation.

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***Q: So tell us a little bit about yourself and about TODEC.***

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**Gallegos:** I was born and raised here in the Inland Empire, in particular here in Perris in Moreno Valley and I was basically born into the movement. My parents were organizers with the farmworker movement so this is something that it's a lifestyle – so very proud to be part of TODEC and being a part of TODEC's youth leadership pipeline that gave us the opportunity and also the tools necessary to go on and beyond, and the community conscious(ness) to always come back to community and do what's best and never be quiet against any type of injustices.

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***Q: Wonderful. How did you become interested in advocating for healthcare reform?***

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**Gallegos:** It's something that through my childhood, it was very personal seeing a lot of our compañeros, a lot of co-workers of my parents that literally didn't find out that they had cancer because of the pesticides. Well, many, many years ago, seeing the need of having prevention throughout my childhood, not only with other compañeros but also within my family.

It's something that we take for granted – some of us that have privilege that have the privilege to be born here and have access to programs and opportunities that many undocumented immigrants don't. So it's been a life commitment to create justice, not only around immigrant justice, but also around access to health for all folks regardless of immigration status.

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***Q: Right. Thank you. Nearly two-thirds of Californians support healthcare coverage for undocumented immigrants, according to a statewide survey by the Public Policy Institute of California. Can you talk about the contributions to our economy that the communities you serve are making?***

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**Gallegos:** Yes. So the contributions are amazing – not only economically, culturally, but also politically. Being born and raised here in the state of California in particular here in the Inland Empire, where I live. We've seen the contributions through our workers – workers that have given their working life to our Golden State of California and have never received nothing in return. The pandemic has definitely shed a light (on) the inequities we have seen all my life and the contributions that they have made, and the fears that go along with that, living in a border region where back in the day, you know, our area's from Perris all the way to Tijuana from Coachella all the way to Mexicali. We are a border region where Border Patrol patrols our streets, continues to separate our families. Back in the day when the farmers didn't want to pay the workers, they would just call (the) Border Patrol because they were in our streets and they would deport them.

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So all of these injustices were very real and they continue to be real and specifically, because we continue to be a border region and a lot of the workers that continue to contribute to the state's economy don't receive anything in return. So the contributions are tremendous, and we have seen, you have seen as well, you walk into any store, any restaurant, anywhere – everybody's hiring, everybody's hiring, but the workforce that wants to work is unable to get hired because they don't have an immigration status. So we're losing a lot of, a tremendous amount of workforce because they don't have the ability to get a green card and work legally in the United States.

You know we allow all these companies to do E-Verify so they won't hire you if you don't have immigration status. So definitely the state of California and the

United States are missing out, continue to miss out on many of the contributors that the workforce that immigrants have. I know this is a federal issue, but here in the state of California, we continue to push through and continue to step up, to protect those that don't have the same privilege that many of us do.

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***Q: Got it. Thank you. There's been significant progress in improving health coverage and access for immigrant workers in recent years, but it hasn't been easy. Talk to us about the struggle to expand Medi-Cal and TODEC's role in it.***

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**Gallegos:** Our role ... started almost four decades ago, elevating the realities to educate and inform our political systems and those that have power into the inequities that we continue seeing. Many of our workers pass away because they didn't have prevention, right? So this has been a long, long struggle for many, many years, as we all know those that don't have immigration status weren't able to get any type of Medi-Cal. They would go to the hospital when it was already too late and I've had several family members that literally passed away and if we would've had access to prevention, you know, a lot of these situations would've been dealt with early on, but it's definitely been a struggle of elevating the realities, but also creating a consciousness amongst our politicians and those that vote in favor or when there's advocacy being done to pass certain laws. But it's been a lot – not only creating the consciousness, but also creating civic engagement within our communities to hold all of those in power accountable, that they are there to represent our communities.

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And they're there to address the needs of our communities, regardless of if they have a green card or not because at the end of the day, we reside in their districts. So it's been four decades organizing and mobilizing to build power amongst the community, to hold folks accountable. So through the work that we've been doing, elevating the realities and mobilizing when we have to mobilize, but in working with partners across the state to really push on policies

that reflect the needs of our community, we are very proud when the first expansion for the kids, undocumented kids, 18 and under, and then the expansion to young adults, undocumented young adults in the state of California. But our biggest push has always been our elders. Why? Because for us, it's personal. It's personal that we've seen our grandparents, our great grandparents deteriorate, our parents deteriorate and give their working life to our state of California, never receiving anything in return.

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They've always been a priority and if it wasn't for the pandemic, I don't know where we would be at right now because the pandemic has definitely helped us leverage our advocacy to open the eyes of those that are in power so they could address the need of Medi-Cal coverage. So now May 1 came and we have full scope Medi-Cal for undocumented older adults – (age) 50-plus in the state of California. It is a dream. Earlier today we got a call, you know, I got a call from one of our members saying 'I got my Medi-Cal card' and she was just in tears. She was just in tears and for us it was very emotional because she's all "so many years of organizing" and she would go to Sacramento and talk to our politicians about why they needed health care and she finally, today, actually today, she got her card and she's all 'our work does help.'

And she's getting the word out to all her neighbors and friends that are undocumented that are 50- plus showing her their card, that it's real and to continue to stay quiet, that's the biggest sin we have. Staying quiet is not even an option and seeing the Medi-Cal expansion become a reality. It's just been so personal, not only for us as an organization, but our entire members, but our entire region and the entire state of California, that they're finally giving back a little bit of what our workers have been deserving for so many years.

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***Q: Wow. That's amazing. Which challenges still remain when it comes to health justice for the communities that you serve?***

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**Gallegos:** Well, right now the challenge is we still have a big gap, (age) 27 to 49, which is our working class, which is many of our, the work we do within at the grassroots level, going to the fields, talking to the workers. We continue seeing a lot of our farm workers finding out that they have diabetes when it's too late. We have a couple of our farm workers that literally lost their vision already and if it wasn't for them starting to feel really ill, they wouldn't have gone to the doctor and at that point it was too late. So prevention is key for everything and for us, prevention goes along with Medi-Cal expansion and that's why for us, it's very important that we actually continue filling the gap of the (age) 27 to 49, but then also having quality health care. We continue to elevate the need for the importance of single payer.

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That would be our ultimate vision and goal ... because we all deserve quality. Every human being. There's no money amount or power to a human being. We all, we're all the same and we all deserve the best health care, especially as we continue to lose lives due to the pandemic, due to cancer, due to diabetes, due to all these illnesses that they have to be caught early on. But when you don't have access to any prevention, how are you going to find out? You go to the doctor when it's too late.

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**Q: Right. You mentioned a couple of farm workers who have gone blind. Do you have any stories or anecdotes that illustrate this point that really touched you?**

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**Gallegos:** Yes. We've had several stories and one of the ones that I want to share is one of our farmworker women that literally through the pandemic, she continued working and through the work because in 2020, we had some wildfires going on in El Dorado here in San Bernardino County and some of the, you know the bad, bad air quality, you know, our workers continued working and so forth and she literally dropped in the fields. She dropped in the field and what happened is, well, she suffers from asthma because she was born and raised in

the East Valley, which, you know, we have pesticides and all the environmental issues that we have there, that a lot of folks that were born or live in that area suffer from asthma. So they called the ambulance. They took her in. They found out, I mean, not only the situation with, you know, her asthma but they found out that she was COVID positive.

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She was in her third month of her pregnancy. She lost her child and through more analysis that they made, they found out that she had breast cancer. This is one story that reflects many, many communities in different ways, but the importance of having access. You know we're talking about a woman that's actually doing the, you know, the hardest labor – the worst paid labor – and not having access to any medical coverage.

For us, it's very personal that all our workers and not only farm workers, but in general, all our immigrant community really has access to full scope coverage, but then also quality coverage where they're able to prevent these situations. This farmworker women she's still alive, but, you know, she's still going through... she's 33, so she doesn't have access to the full scope. So this is why, the importance of health for all. It should really be health for all, not just for some and that's why within our advocacy effort, we want to make sure that we continue to fill in the gaps of any type of inequities that continue to exist for our workers and immigrants that continue to contribute to our state's economy without receiving anything in return.

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**Q: Does she have any health coverage at all?**

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**Gallegos:** She doesn't. She has emergency Medi-Cal, which is very limited so through donations and through a lot of different programs that we've been able to connect her (with) or she's been getting assistance to get seen, especially community clinics that are really coming together to support community members like herself. But if it wasn't for (FQHCs – Federally Qualified Health Centers) that

are really, you know, care about community, you know, a lot of our community members would have such a difficult time because most of the time, you know, our community members rely on “remedios,” which are home remedies. But at the same time when you're, when you're dealing with a health condition that you need more than just a remedy, this is where it gets really expensive for our community and then the fear of even (triggering) **public charge**, you know, even though, you know, public charge went back to its normal state past the Trump administration now with the Biden administration, but the fear continues to be there.

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And the fear is very real because we had situations (where) we had community members that even through the pandemic, that they had all the symptoms, they couldn't even breathe, but they didn't even want to go to the hospital because they didn't want to trigger public charge. They said, ‘well, my husband is still alive and my kids are still here and they're undocumented. If I go into the hospital and access any type of health care, I'm going to prevent them from getting any type of green card.’

So this is the mentality and the fears that continue to haunt our vulnerable populations that, you know, although, public charge won't affect them but it's just the fear of accessing any benefit. We have to understand that when immigrants decide to migrate to the United States, they come in hopes of a better future for themselves and their family.

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And at the end of the day, their kids. They come here to work and contribute. They're not here to ask, even if they would ask, they wouldn't get any benefit because they don't have access because they don't have a green card. So, you know, a lot of the information that folks are talking about saying that immigrants are taking, no we're giving and if it wasn't for immigrants, here in the state of California, we wouldn't be the Golden State that we are and it's time that our state really acknowledges and values our workers, not only in times of pandemic, when you need farm workers to feed America, but always, and we need to take care of our workforce, because if our workers are healthy, our community is

healthy and our economy is healthy. So it's a win-win and it's a best investment that goes to our state government, even our federal government could do, really create policies and systems that really address the needs of the population that continues to give without receiving anything in return.

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***Thank you, Luz Gallegos.***

Do you have a personal story you'd like to share about our 'wack' healthcare system? Contact us through our website at [heal-ca.org](http://heal-ca.org).

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