

Supporting Immigrants to Succeed

Carmen Contreras

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. What programs or benefits are available to immigrants in your community?
2. What does “get on our feet” mean? What supports have you needed to get on your feet? Find an online video of “Get on Your Feet” by Gloria Estefan and watch it with your class.

We Want to Succeed, We Have a Lot to Offer

Most immigrants to the United States want to succeed. We work long hours and make many sacrifices. We come to the United States because we want better opportunities. There are state and federal programs that support us to get on our feet. Thanks to these programs and our hard work, we can contribute a lot to U.S. society.

In Mexico, my husband did not have a good job. He struggled a lot. His friend invited him to come to Arizona, to work. My husband was afraid because he didn't have papers. He took the risk

We work and learn and provide for our families. We start from zero, and we do our best.

to come here because there were no opportunities in Mexico.

He started as a landscaper. Then he found a job at McDonalds. He experienced discrimination.

His co-workers called him “wetback.” They said he didn't belong here. They made him feel bad. Sometimes, he didn't have money for lunch, so he sat and watched others eat.

My husband worked hard. He never had time to go to school, but he learned English on his own. At one time, he had three jobs. He came to the U.S. illegally, but my husband is an honest and responsible person. He has integrity. He got his residency through an amnesty program. Now, he is a warehouse supervisor.

Government Programs that Help Us

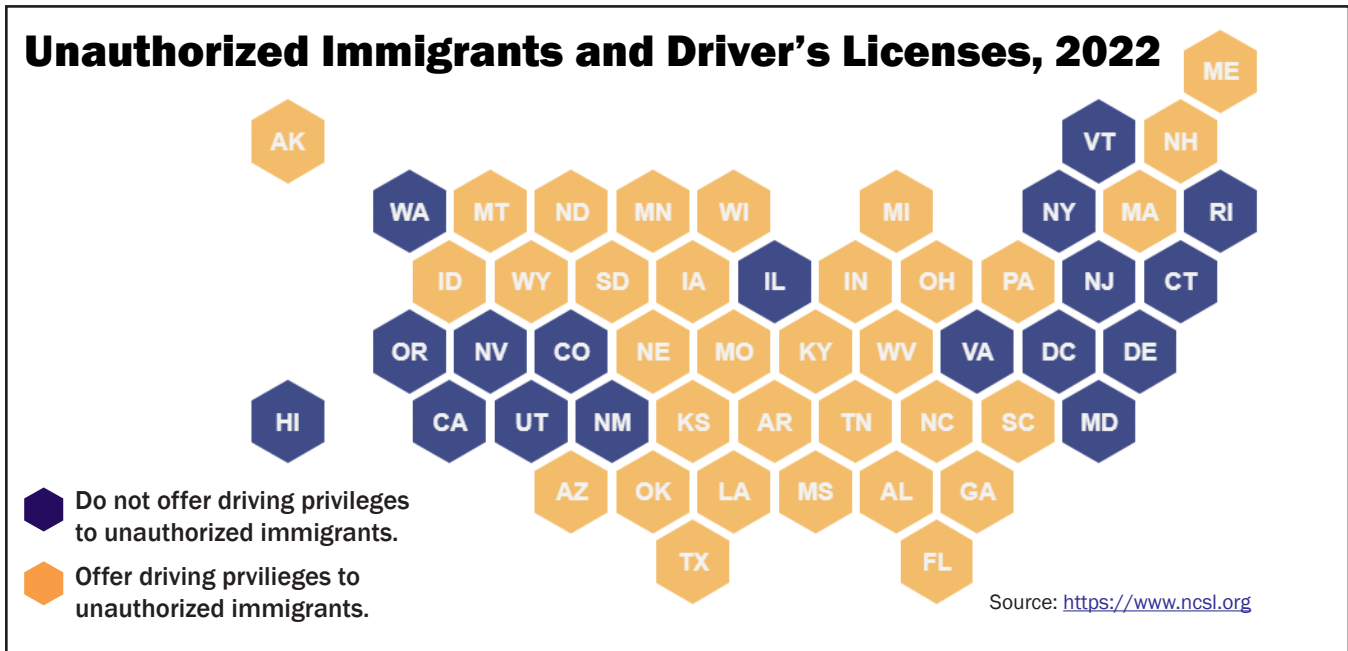
After we married, he helped me get my residency papers. Now, I am in the Arizona Work Program. This program gave me the confidence that I needed to find a job and feel empowered as a woman. I have acquired many skills, and I can contribute something to this country.

The truth is, however, that there are times when I want to drop out of English class. I work long hours, and I have to drive two hours every day to go to work. It is very tiring to arrive home at 10:30 pm, and I still have to do reports for my job plus homework for English. There are not many hours left for sleeping.

The Arizona Work Program is a free program provided by the state. There are other federal and state programs that provide assistance to people who need it. For instance, my family and I have been lucky enough to take advantage of programs such as FAFSA to help my kids get through college. On rare occasions, my husband would take food from local food banks. For a short time, we got help from state-subsidized health insurance.

There are other programs to help people with various needs. For example, there is a federal program called the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP). The ACP will give you a discount on internet access. This is a very important program for all people of this country, not just immigrants. If you are not connected to the internet, it is hard to go to school, track your children in school, apply for jobs, and do so many other things.

Benefits help people when they are having a hard time. For example, I know a family where the dad and his children are citizens, but the mom is undocumented. It is very difficult for them because they are always afraid. The mom can't work, and she doesn't speak English. When they have an emergency, she can't drive. Even though



the dad works more than 12 hours per day, it isn't enough for a family of five. Nevertheless, thanks to the aid that the government provides them, they have been getting ahead.

And We Contribute to the Economy

Do some immigrants abuse these benefits? Yes, some do. They do not want to work full time because if they make too much money, they won't get to keep their benefits. These immigrants make other immigrants look bad. Some U.S.-born people think that immigrants come here to take their jobs and benefits. But this is mostly not true.

I know many more immigrants who work hard and are willing to do any type of work. Most immigrants don't come here for the government aid. We come here to work. By working here, we contribute to economic growth: we do all kinds of jobs – even the unpopular ones, and we pay taxes.

In conclusion, many of us come to this country, and it is very hard for us. We leave behind our whole lives. Nevertheless, we fight to succeed. We work and learn and provide for our families. We start from zero, and we do our best. When there are government programs to help us, we can use those to support ourselves, so we can contribute even more to U.S. society.

Source: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/immigrants-contribute-greatly-to-us-economy-despite-administrations>

AFTER YOU READ:

1. According to the author, why are government programs and benefits important?
2. Study the map above. Research the law in your state. Write to your state congressperson and let him or her know what you think about the law that is in place in your state on this topic.
3. Find out more about the Affordable Connectivity Program. Read "The Present is Digital" in <https://changeagent.nelrc.org/issues/issue-55-february-2022-re-training-ourselves-re-making-our-work/>. Available at intermediate and advanced levels.

Carmen Contreras was an elementary school teacher in Mexico. Now, she is a student at Santa Cruz County Continuing Education in Nogales, AZ, which helped her get a job working with autistic children. Her goal is to get her teacher's license and teach Spanish in middle school.

