

# Essential Care Workers in Chelsea, MA During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Harvard College:

Tobi Ariyo

Kevin Chen

Sanjana Singh

Harvard Law School:

Leanna Katz

Sabrina Zhang

Harvard University:

Rebecca Horwitz-Willis

Northeastern Law School:

Robin Woolford

University of Texas:

Orlando Ochoa

With Professor Lucie White (Harvard Law School) and Professor Hila Shamir  
(Tel-Aviv University Faculty of Law)

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# A City Providing Care

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# A City That Needs Care

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Infection rates in Chelsea are **5x higher** than the MA state average.

# Our Inquiry

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How does the law produce a landscape where those who care for others are left **without a social safety net** to care for themselves?

What legal levers are available to **empower** an essential care worker in Chelsea?

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We considered these questions through the perspective of a female-identifying undocumented Latinx individual who lives in Chelsea with her children and works in Boston as an essential care worker.

# A History of Resilience

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Chelsea is a **small and dense** city, home to at least 35,000 residents living in **1.9 sq miles**. Bordered by the Chelsea Creek and proximate to Logan Airport, Chelsea has long been **attractive to industries** and **immigrants**.

**The city has been defined by fires**. In 1873, a fire in Boston **pushed factories across the river**.

Chelsea was **devastated by fires in 1908 and 1973**, each time quickly **rebuilding** itself.

Chelsea has a **long tradition of community activism**. The grassroots response to COVID-19 has been no different, with **non-profits caring for for their city**.

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# A City of Immigrants

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Today, the city is a haven for Central American migrants in search of community and opportunity in the United States.!

In Chelsea:

- ! " of the residents are Latinx
- ! # of the residents are undocumented
- ! Around 20% live in poverty
- ! Over 80% of Chelsea workers are “essential”; 20% are care workers.

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High concentration of poverty and undocumented residents has lowered Chelsea residents' bargaining power with politicians, landlords, and employers.

# Care Work: Attending to Others' Needs

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## Paid care work (formal):

- child care workers
- personal and home care aides
- nursing, psychiatric and home health aides

## Characteristics of paid care work:

- low barriers to entry
- loosely regulated
- female gendered
- long, irregular hours for low pay

## Unpaid care work (informal):

- child care
- cooking/cleaning
- elder care
- considered domain of “women”

# Care Work: Gendered, Raced, and Classed

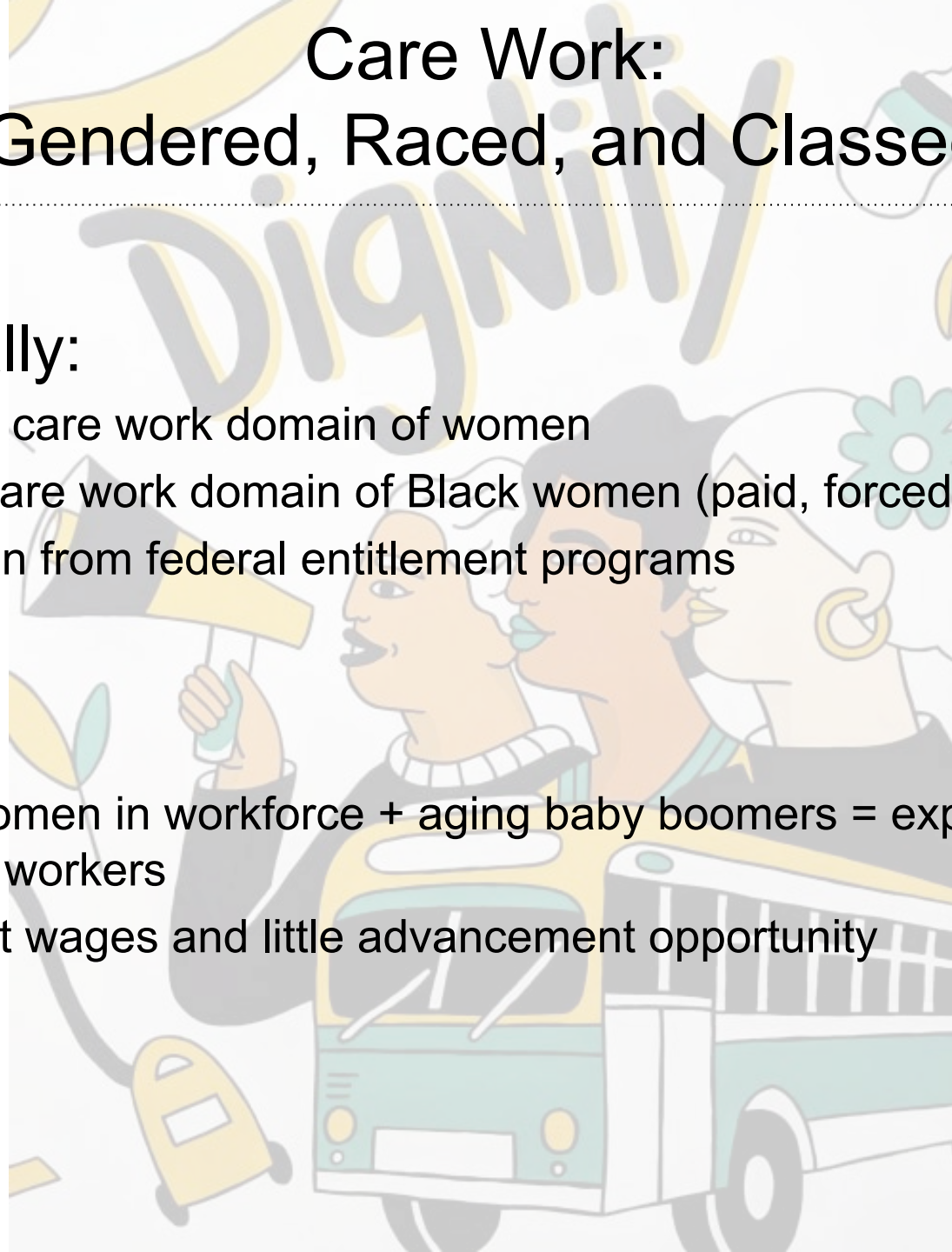
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## Historically:

- informal care work domain of women
- formal care work domain of Black women (paid, forced & stolen)
- exclusion from federal entitlement programs

## Today:

- more women in workforce + aging baby boomers = expanded need for care workers
- stagnant wages and little advancement opportunity





# Care Work: Gendered, Raced, and Classed

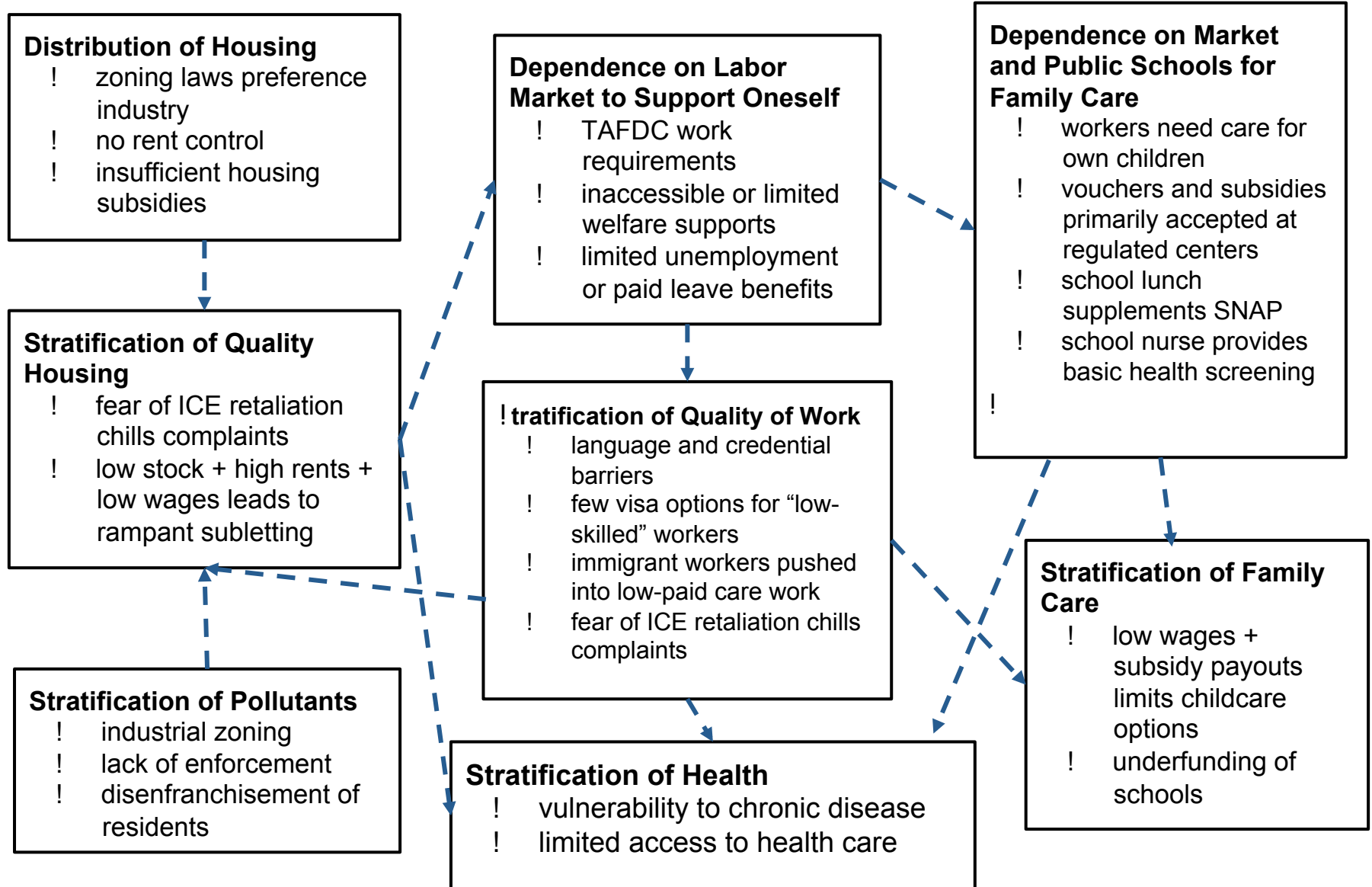
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## Care work reflects and reifies societal inequities

- structural inequalities exclude negatively racialized women from higher status employment
- language barriers and immigration status limit opportunities for Latinx workers

As a result, care work attracts those with little bargaining power; workers are stratified within the labor market and within the care sector specifically.

# A Dizzying Array of Laws Produces Vulnerability & Resilience in Chelsea, such as ...



# Chelsea Residents Identify the Key Laws that Produce Vulnerability

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**Employment:** I don't feel well, but without a positive COVID test my boss will fire me if I take off work.

**Housing:** I can't believe the landlord rented out our second bedroom to another family. I want to complain, but what if he calls ICE?

**Food:** I'll be in line for hours waiting for food to feed my family.

**Care:** I hope my two kids are okay home alone. What if the neighbors call DCF?

**Environment:** My son's asthma has been really bad for months. Is he more susceptible to COVID?

# What Legal Drivers Distribute **Vulnerability** and **Resilience** for Essential Care Workers in Chelsea?

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- How has **political prioritization of business interests over local residents' needs** constrained care workers' agency?
- How have immigrant restrictions on **workplace protections and social supports** stratified care workers?
- How have **strict eligibility requirements for social and economic welfare** impacted care workers' reliance on the market to support themselves?
- How have **barriers to child care and paid family leave** impacted how care workers care for their dependants?
- How have **schools, grassroots organizations and neighborhood networks** de-stratified **hierarchies** of care?

# Environment

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**Air pollutants** increase health vulnerability

**Laws and processes** **dispossess** residents of ownership over environment

**Environmental injustice** significantly burdens communities of color

Tobin bridge connects Chelsea to Boston

Environmental practices benefit corporate interests, shifting power away from Chelsea residents.

# What is the impact on an essential care worker in Chelsea?

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- **Environment:** Shifting control away from residents to corporate interests has resulted in high pollution, which is linked to increased COVID death rates.

# Housing Insecurity

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## Limited affordable housing:

Gentrification

Limited subsidized housing

Excluded from federal subsidies,  
but MA subsidies available

City of Chelsea \$250 subsidy <  
~\$800/month rent for 1 room

Fear of ICE chills complaints of  
substandard living conditions.

Despite eviction moratorium,  
ongoing evictions occur

Limited tenant protections,  
rental subsidies, and supply  
diminish residents' bargaining  
power with landlords.

# What is the impact on an essential care worker in Chelsea?

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- **Environment:** Corporate control has resulted in high pollution, linked to increased COVID death rates.
- **Housing:** Diminished bargaining power with landlords leaves residents in crowded housing, unable to socially distance or self-quarantine during the COVID pandemic.



# Food Insecurity

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## **Fresh food in Chelsea**

One farmers market

One supermarket

Nine food pantries

Pop-up COVID pantries

## **Limited state support**

Restrictions on SNAP

Fear of “public charge”

School lunch and P-  
EBT, WIC and food  
pantries open to all

State funding for food distribution rather than direct cash support limits residents' autonomy.

# What is the impact on an essential care worker in Chelsea?

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- **Environment:** Corporate control has resulted in high pollution, linked to increased COVID death rates.
- **Housing:** Less bargaining power with landlords leaves residents in crowded housing during COVID.
- **Food:** Reliance on food distribution means that Chelsea residents wait in line for hours at food pantries, increasing risk of exposure to COVID and constraining time to care for their family.

# Employment

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## Undocumented Latina care workers have fewer employment options

Essential workers

Low average wage

Wage theft

Sex-ual ha-rass-ment and as-sault

Not unionized

No unemployment insurance

Few workplace safety protections during  
COVID

Crowded 111 bus from Chelsea to Boston

Lack of employment options and minimal protections  
leave negatively racialized workers with little  
bargaining power.

# What is the impact on an essential care worker in Chelsea?

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- **Environment:** Corporate control has resulted in high pollution, linked to increased COVID death rates.
  - **Housing:** Less bargaining power with landlords leaves residents in crowded housing during COVID.
  - **Food:** Waiting in line for food raises risk of COVID exposure.
- **Employment:** Heavy reliance on a labor market with few options leaves negatively racialized female workers little bargaining power to challenge employment that exposes them to COVID.

# Welfare Support

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! Eligibility for **welfare programs**  
! **restricted for non-citizens.**

Supplemental **support from MA and**  
**City of Chelsea.**

**Fear of ICE** discourages seeking  
COVID tests.

Undocumented care workers access few welfare  
benefits, increasing their reliance on private  
market for wages.

# What is the impact on an essential care worker in Chelsea?

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- **Environment:** Corporate control has resulted in high pollution, linked to increased COVID death rates.
  - **Housing:** Less bargaining power with landlords leaves residents in crowded housing during COVID.
  - **Food:** Waiting in line for food raises risk of COVID exposure.
  - **Employment:** Negatively racialized female caregivers rely on market to support themselves and risk exposure to COVID at work.
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- **Welfare Policies:** Tying social supports to employment and immigration status leaves low-income undocumented care workers heavily reliant on the labor market, even when employment risks COVID exposure.

# Child and Family Care"

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Limited state funds and availability of childcare; during COVID, 1 center in Chelsea.

Schools closed, but food benefits continued.

FFCRA emergency leave, many essential workers exempt.

Lack of state support for childcare and paid leave options intensifies burden on care workers to care for their families. "

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# What is the impact on an essential care worker in Chelsea?

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- **Environment:** Corporate control has resulted in high pollution, linked to increased COVID death rates.
  - **Housing:** Less bargaining power with landlords leaves residents in crowded housing during COVID.
  - **Food:** Reliance on food distribution means that Chelsea residents wait in line for hours at food pantries risking exposure to COVID.
  - **Employment:** Care workers, most often female and racialized, rely on market to support themselves, and risk of exposure to COVID at work.
  - **Welfare policies:** Exclusion of undocumented care workers increases COVID vulnerability.
- **Child and Family Care:** Without state support, care workers deal with irreconcilable demands between selling their care labor in the market, and providing care for their family.



# What is the impact on an essential care worker in Chelsea?

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- **Environment:** Corporate control has resulted in high pollution, linked to increased COVID death rates.
- **Housing:** Less bargaining power with landlords leaves residents in crowded housing during COVID.
- **Food:** Waiting in line for food raises risk of COVID exposure.
- **Employment:** Negatively racialized female caregivers rely on market to support themselves and risk exposure to COVID at work.
- **Welfare policies:** Exclusion of undocumented care workers increases COVID vulnerability.
- **Child and Family Care:** Limited state support during COVID leaves children without care.

# Strengthening Resilience

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How might laws redistribute vulnerability and resilience to Chelsea care workers?

We considered interventions through the perspective of an undocumented Latinx care worker, in order to craft policies that advance equality more broadly throughout the Chelsea community. !

# Existing Efforts to Build Resilience in Chelsea

- **Pop-up food pantries** by groups such as the Chelsea Collaborative and St. Luke's - San Lucas Episcopal Church distributing groceries, diapers, and other household and personal necessities to over 3,000 community members each week.
- **Housing security advocacy** led by City Life Vida Urbana, GreenRoots, and Chelsea Collaborative.
- Efforts to establish a **land trust** with GreenRoots.
- **Neighborhood wellness teams** with neighbors helping neighbors, supported by GreenRotos and other community groups and government.
- Efforts to **expand access to medical services** with leadership from Dr. Julia Koehler.

# Pathways to Build Resilience

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## Stabilize environment and housing

- Land trusts that benefit lower-income residents of color
- Rent control, increase supply of public housing
- Improve transportation options
- Strengthen environmental regulations
- Requirements for local voice in land use decisions
- **State support for local environmental justice efforts**

Doing so would shift more bargaining power to Chelsea residents to build a healthier environment.

# Pathways to Build Resilience

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## **Destratify undocumented immigrants**

- Expand asylum rules for Latinx migrants
- Expand access to state-funded welfare programs and federal services
- Build capacity of community organizations
- **E.g. food distribution by Chelsea Collaborative and St. Luke's - San Lucas Church**

! Doing so would shift more bargaining power to  
! undocumented immigrants to advocate for fair wages,  
! decent housing, and access to basic social services.

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# Pathways to Build Resilience

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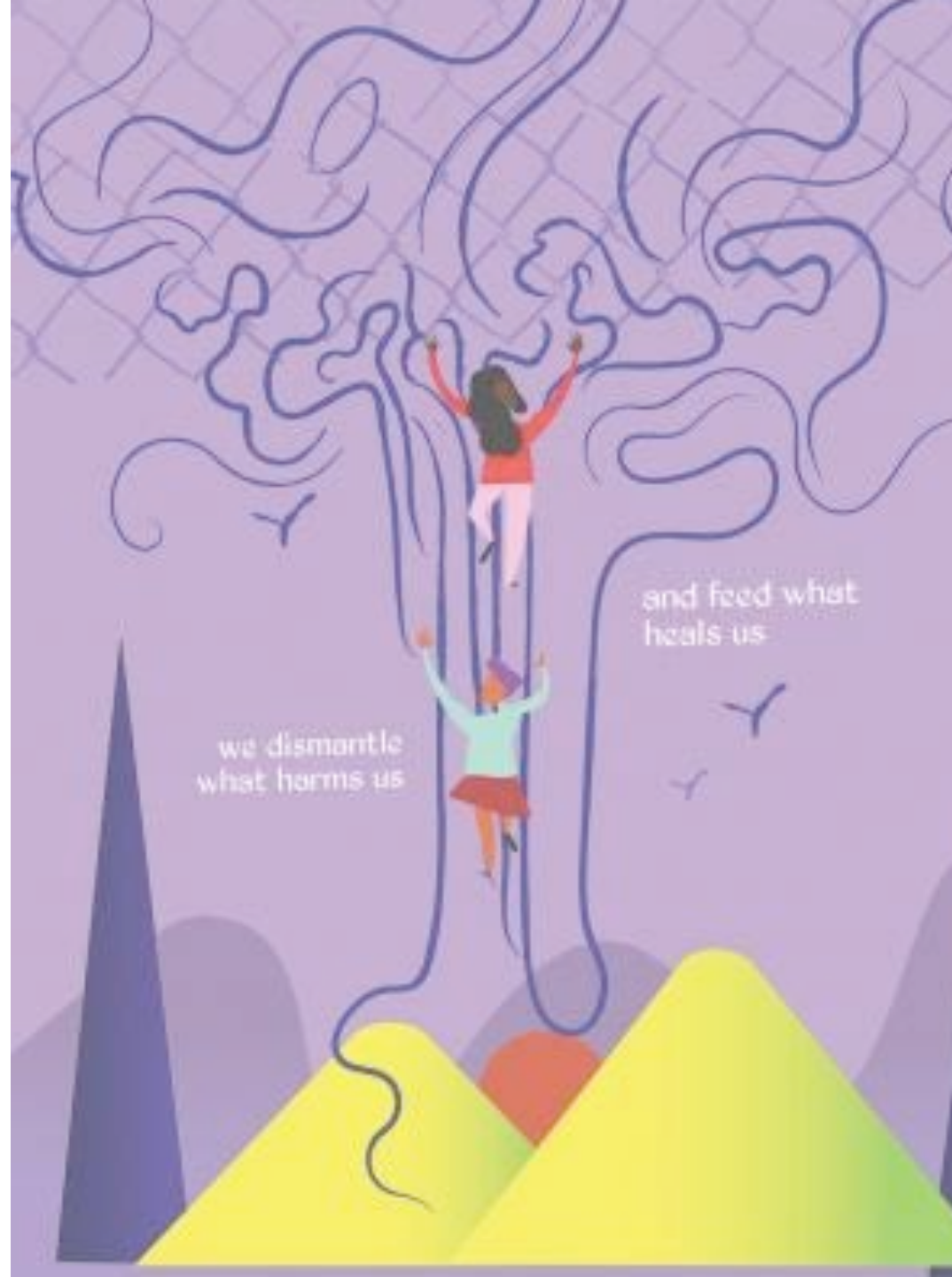
## **Destratify care work**


- Challenge gendering of care work
- Universal Basic Income /liveable minimum wage
- Build channels for worker voice in shaping work conditions
- Financial support for neighborhood care networks
  - **Neighborhood Wellness Teams:** community members provide mutual aid, supported by non-profits and gov

Doing so would shift more bargaining power to care workers, who are disproportionately women of color, to advocate for better employment conditions, choose whether to rely on the market for care, and raise women's status in their homes.

These pathways are intended to destratify hierarchies constructed based on gender, race and immigration status.

**A visionary democratic state would support community-based initiatives among neighbors and grassroots organizations.**





**Thank you!**  
**Any questions?**