

---

## Employment Rights of Undocumented Workers

---

 [legalaidatwork.org/factsheet/undocumented-workers-employment-rights](http://legalaidatwork.org/factsheet/undocumented-workers-employment-rights)

### [Skip to content](#)

With a few exceptions, undocumented workers enjoy all of the legal rights and remedies provided to workers by both federal and California law. (The exceptions to this general rule, mainly in the areas of unemployment insurance and union organizing, are discussed below.)

### **1. What legal rights do I have as an undocumented worker?**

With a few exceptions, undocumented workers enjoy all of the legal rights and remedies provided by both Federal and California law. (The exceptions to this general rule, mainly in the areas of unemployment insurance and union organizing, are discussed below.)

### **2. I am undocumented and have lost my job or suffered other hardship because of COVID-19. Are there any government benefits available to me in California?**

Starting on May 18, 2020, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) will provide one-time \$500 grants to persons 19 and older who can show that they: (1) are undocumented; (2) are not eligible for federal COVID-19 related assistance; and (3) have experienced hardship because of COVID-19. A maximum of two persons per household can receive funding under this program, which is known as the “Disaster Relief Assistance for Immigrants Project” (DRAI). No one’s personal information will be shared with any government agency.

The CDSS has selected twelve non-profit organizations across the state to help individuals apply for and receive these disaster relief funds. (Legal Aid at Work is not one of the designated non-profits.)

**Individuals can apply for DRAI funds starting on May 18, 2020.** To do so, they should contact the nonprofit organization assigned to their county of residence. To see which organization has been assigned to your county, visit this link:

<https://cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/immigration/covid-19-drai>. Applicants will be considered on a first come, first served basis.

Undocumented workers might also qualify for California's State Disability Insurance (SDI), Paid Family Leave (PFL), workers' compensation, and/or paid sick days. For more information on some of those programs, see questions 5 and 9-10 below.

### **3. I am undocumented and have lost my job or suffered other hardship because of COVID-19. If I don't qualify for government benefits or need additional funds, are there any other sources of financial assistance available to me as an undocumented worker in California?**

Private organizations and foundations have also created emergency relief funds for undocumented workers. Legal Aid at Work has a list of funds at:

<https://legalaidatwork.org/blog/relief-funds/>.

For more answers to questions regarding your job and COVID-19, visit this link:

<https://legalaidatwork.org/factsheet/coronavirus-faq/>

### **4. As an undocumented worker, what are my rights under wage and hour laws?**

**Undocumented workers generally have the same wage and hour rights as other workers.** Thus, the same Federal and California wage and hour laws that apply to authorized workers generally apply to persons working without legal immigration status. These laws establish your right to minimum wage, overtime pay, breaks, tips, and other forms of wages. For example, an employer cannot refuse to pay you by saying that you should not have been working in the first place because you have no "papers." (However, if you have been fired because you have a wage complaint, it's less clear whether you can recover the income you lost due to being fired.)

**Filing a Wage Claim:** If you choose to file a wage claim, you can either file with the California Division of Labor Standards Enforcement (also known as the "Labor Commissioner") or sue your employer in court. You can also contact the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). Neither of these agencies should question you about your immigration status, or report your lack of status if it is somehow revealed. For further information, see our Pay and Hours Fact Sheets.

### **5. As an undocumented worker, can I receive workers' compensation benefits?**

**Yes.** All workers who are injured on the job, *including undocumented workers*, are eligible for workers' compensation benefits in California to cover the cost of medical treatment and, in some cases, lost wages. However, undocumented employees may

not be eligible for some job retraining benefits. In addition, if you have been fired because you have a workers' compensation claim, it's less clear whether you can recover the income you lost due to being fired.

**Filing a Workers' Compensation Claim:** If you choose to file a workers' compensation claim, you should contact the employer to get and file a claim form. If your employer refuses to give you a claim form, then you should contact the state Workers' Compensation Appeals Board (WCAB). If your claim is approved, you may be entitled to reasonable medical expenses, disability benefits, and rehabilitation benefits.

For more information, see our Workers' Compensation Fact Sheets.

## **6. As an undocumented worker, what are my rights under health and safety laws?**

**Health and safety laws protect all employees regardless of their immigration status.** Therefore, undocumented workers have rights to information regarding their health and safety rights. They have the right to refuse unsafe work if they reasonably believe it would create a real and apparent hazard to them or their co-workers. They also can file health and safety complaints with the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Cal/OSHA).

**Filing a Health and Safety Claim:** If you choose to file a health and safety claim, you should contact Cal/OSHA. The agency will then investigate for health and safety violations and your employer may be forced to stop its illegal practices. Cal/OSHA should not question you about your immigration status or report your lack of status if it is somehow revealed.

## **7. As an undocumented worker, can I organize or participate in a union?**

**Yes.** If you are an undocumented worker who doesn't work for the government, the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) protects your right to organize a union, elect a union, and collectively bargain with employers. It also allows you to engage in "**concerted activity**" to improve working conditions for all employees even if there is no union yet. Concerted action occurs when two or more employees act, with their employer's knowledge, to improve working conditions on behalf of all employees, or if one employee acts on behalf of others.

If your employer violates the NLRA by retaliating against you for your union activity or by committing another unlawful labor practice, however, your remedies will be limited because of your immigration status. In particular, if you were unlawfully fired, you will

not be entitled to “backpay” (your wages for the time you were unemployed because of the firing). Also, you will not be able to get your job back because, as an undocumented worker, you do not have legal work authorization.

**Filing a Union Activity Claim:** If you choose to file a union activity claim, you should contact the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The NLRB should not question you about your immigration status or report your immigration status if it is somehow revealed.

For more information on your right to organize a union, see our Fact Sheet [The Right To Organize and Join a Union](#).

## **8. As an undocumented worker, can I collect unemployment insurance?**

**No.** To collect unemployment insurance, workers must be both “able to work” and “available for work”. The California Employment Development Department (EDD), the agency that decides who has the right to unemployment insurance, has determined that undocumented workers are not, “available for work,” because they are not legally eligible for work. Therefore, undocumented workers normally cannot collect unemployment insurance.

## **9. As an undocumented worker, can I collect State Disability Insurance?**

**Yes.** The California State Disability Insurance (SDI) system is funded by employee contributions and is designed to protect unemployed and disabled persons against loss of wages when they are unable to perform their normal work because of illness or injury. Employees, including undocumented employees, have the right to benefit from the money they have contributed. Undocumented workers who have suffered from a non-work related disability, *and* who have paid into the state disability system, may be entitled to receive at least as much as they put into the system.

For example, consider an undocumented worker who loses her job and becomes too depressed to work as a result: She does not qualify for Unemployment Insurance because she is undocumented. But she may qualify for SDI. (Note that workers need proof of their medical condition from a doctor to qualify for SDI.)

To determine if you have paid into the system, you should look to see if SDI insurance was deducted from your pay stub. If you were paid in cash and not given a pay stub, then you probably are not eligible for SDI because it is unlikely that any deductions were made from your wages. Unlike unemployment insurance, a worker does not have to be available for work to receive SDI.

**Filing a State Disability Insurance claim:** If you choose to file a state disability claim, you should contact the California Employment Development Department (EDD). The EDD should not question you about your immigration status or report your lack of status if it is somehow revealed.

## **10. As an undocumented worker, can I collect state Paid Family Leave benefits?**

**Yes.** You may be eligible to receive California Paid Family Leave (usually 60% or 70% of your pay for up to 6 weeks) if you are missing work to care for a seriously ill parent, parent-in-law, child, spouse, domestic partner, sibling, grandparent or grandchild. Parents can also receive Paid Family Leave to bond with a new child in your family. You can apply for Paid Family Leave from the Employment Development Department at [www.EDD.ca.gov](http://www.EDD.ca.gov). You will need a healthcare provider or local healthcare official to certify your family member's health condition or proof of your relationship with the child (for example, a birth certificate or adoption paperwork). If you work in San Francisco, California, your employer may be required to provide you additional compensation, up to 100% of your pay.

For more information, visit the EDD website by [clicking here](#). The EDD should not question you about your immigration status or report your lack of status if it is somehow revealed.

## **11. Do anti-discrimination laws protect undocumented workers?**

**Yes.** Under Federal and California anti-discrimination laws, employers cannot illegally discriminate against any worker, *including undocumented workers*. Therefore, even if you are an undocumented worker, your employer cannot fire you, refuse to hire you, harass you, or take other action against you because of your national origin (including your English language capabilities), race, color, sex, pregnancy, religion, age, or disability, or (under California law) for other reasons such as your sexual orientation, gender identity (e.g., transgender status) marital status, and political beliefs. However, if you were fired by your employer as part of the discrimination, it's less clear whether you can recover the income you lost because you were fired, or whether you can get your job back.

**Filing a Claim:** If you choose to file a discrimination claim, you should contact the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), or the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH), depending on the nature of your claim. If your claim is successful, your employer may have to stop its illegal practices and you may be eligible for remedies, possibly including certain monetary damages.

For more information about your rights to be free from discrimination in the workplace, see our Fact Sheet [Discrimination and Harassment in Employment](#).

## **12. Can my employer discriminate against me because I am undocumented?**

Employers are required to refuse to hire, or terminate, an undocumented worker once they learn of her lack of work authorization. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) makes it illegal for employers to knowingly hire or continue to employ undocumented workers. Therefore, when an employee is hired, her employer is required to ask for documents that show her identity as well as her authorization to work in the U.S., and those documents must “reasonably appear to be genuine.”

Sometimes, however, employers will fire workers using the excuse that they were undocumented, when their real reason for firing them was actually something else. For instance, an employer may say that it fired someone due to her lack of documentation because it does not want to admit it fired her because she became pregnant, is Latina, or complained about being sexually harassed. In those cases, because undocumented workers are still covered by the general laws against employment discrimination, the employer is still breaking the law because its true reason for firing the worker was illegal.

Likewise, your employer cannot use your lack of immigration status as an excuse to fire you because you complained about nonpayment of wages, a workplace injury, or tried to help organize a union in your workplace. In those cases, because undocumented workers are still covered by laws that prohibit employers from retaliating against workers who assert their legal rights, the employer is still breaking the law.

## **13. As an undocumented worker, do I run any risks if I choose to file a claim against my employer?**

**Yes.** The greatest risk in filing an employment claim as an undocumented worker is that your employer may *retaliate* against you. Retaliation means that your employer takes or threatens to take some employment action against you, or reports or threatens to report you to ICE (“Immigration and Customs Enforcement”, an agency of the Department of Homeland Security), because you filed a claim against the employer. Retaliation is illegal, however. In fact, employers who retaliate against you because you complained about their unlawful working conditions are breaking the law a second time.

The risk of retaliation is one faced by all employees, documented and undocumented, who raise a legal complaint against their employer. Depending on the law your complaint falls under, you can file a retaliation claim with the Federal or California agency that administers the law, or bring a lawsuit against that retaliation in court.

Undocumented workers face an even greater risk when their employers retaliate against them by reporting them to ICE. Even though the employer is acting illegally if it does so, in general ICE is allowed to follow up on the employer’s report. If ICE does

follow up, it can try to deport you. Worse, if you used false information or papers when you applied for your job, you may be charged criminally, fined, deported, and/or prevented from ever returning to live and work in the U.S. These serious penalties may apply even if you are married to a U.S. citizen, have U.S. citizen children, or have lived in the U.S. for many years. However, California specifically prohibits the report or threat to report an employee's citizenship or immigration status, or that of a family member, because the employee has exercised a right under the California Labor Code, and business may have its license suspended or revoked if the DLSE or a court finds that an employer has retaliated against a complaining worker.

If you are undocumented the choice of whether to go ahead with a complaint against your employer is one you must make only after very careful thought, and after obtaining competent legal advice from attorneys knowledgeable about both employment law and immigration law. Many undocumented workers, given the serious possible consequences of being reported to the immigration authorities, or of having their lack of status revealed in the litigation process, quite understandably choose not to complain about their working conditions.

#### **14. If I am thinking about filing a discrimination, state disability, workers' compensation, labor, health and safety, or wage claim, what should I do to protect myself?**

Before you file a claim, you should call the [Workers' Rights Clinic](#) or a community legal based organization that works with undocumented immigrants. These organizations will have, or know of, advocates who can properly assist you in your decision to file a claim, and in making a claim should you choose to do so. As noted above, you should receive competent legal advice from attorneys who are expert in both employment law and immigration law before you make a decision to go ahead with a claim.

Because you are at risk of employer retaliation, you should consider certain factors in making a decision to file a claim. These include: whether you have ever received threats from your employer; whether your employer knows that you are undocumented; whether your employer has ever reported or threatened to report any of your co-workers who enforced their rights or disagreed with the employer; and whether you believe that your employer may actually go so far as to report you.

In any case, you should never discuss your immigration status at work or carry any false documents with you. Also, you should seek legal advice before disclosing to anyone whether your documents are false.

#### **15. What rights do I have if my employer tells me that the Social Security Administration found a problem with my Social Security number?**

In recent years, employers have suspended or terminated workers because of information received from the Social Security Administration (SSA) that there is a problem with their Social Security number. Often, employers receive “no match” letters from SSA. Technically, an SSA no match letter is a private matter between the SSA and each individual employee, because the letter is sent by SSA only to make sure that workers receive proper credit for their earnings, which can affect future retirement or disability benefits. Employers, however, confuse SSA no match letters for information concerning workers’ immigration status. Some employers even use the letters to intimidate vulnerable workers, including immigrant workers, who are involved in labor organizing campaigns.

If the employer has received information from SSA, the employer must treat all workers the same. That means that if the employer only fires *some* (but not all) workers for whom it received SSA no match letters, the employer may be discriminating against those workers it suspended or terminated. An employer may also be breaking the law if it uses the letter to threaten a group of workers. If your employer tells you that SSA sent notification about a problem with your Social Security number, you can contact Legal Aid at Work or speak with other employment lawyers, or an immigration attorney, to help understand your rights before responding to your employer regarding your Social Security Number, your work authorization, or your immigration status.

## **16. How do I pay my income taxes if I do not have a Social Security Number?**

All workers, including undocumented workers, are required to report their income to the federal Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and to the state Franchise Tax Board. Even if you are paid in cash, you are required to report your income. Also, if you fail to pay your income taxes, you may be turned down for certain benefits that are paid for by your tax dollars (e.g., State Disability Insurance). In addition, immigrants need to show that they have paid taxes in order to be eligible for most immigration relief and benefits for obtaining lawful immigration status.

If you do not have a Social Security Number to report your taxes, and if you cannot get one because you are undocumented, you can use an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) to properly report your income. The Internal Revenue Service can issue an ITIN to any individual who earns income in the United States but is not eligible to receive a Social Security Number. As a side benefit, an ITIN usually can be used to open a bank account with certain financial institutions.

Workers should never give their ITINs to their employers. Instead, workers should use ITINs to file their own tax returns directly with the IRS.



**Applying for an ITIN:** If you want to apply for an ITIN, contact the Internal Revenue Service and request Form W-7. You can also ask the IRS for information about “Acceptance Agents,” who are authorized by IRS to help people apply for an ITIN. The IRS can normally process your application within 6-8 weeks, but it may take as long as 12 weeks or longer. The IRS should keep confidential tax returns that are filed with ITINs, which means that they should not use them to turn people over to immigration authorities. However, there have been some incidents, although limited, where immigrants who filed their tax returns using ITINs were brought to the attention of immigration authorities.

## **17. If I work in California and have a change in my social security number, name, or my federal employment authorization document, what are the risks I face in updating this information with my employer?**

In recent years, employers have suspended or terminated workers because of information received from the Social Security Administration (SSA) that there is a problem with their Social Security number. Often, employers receive “no match” letters from SSA. Technically, an SSA no match letter is a private matter between the SSA and each individual employee, because the letter is sent by SSA only to make sure that workers receive proper credit for their earnings, which can affect future retirement or disability benefits. Employers, however, confuse SSA no match letters for information concerning workers’ immigration status. Some employers even use the letters to intimidate vulnerable workers, including immigrant workers, who are involved in labor organizing campaigns.

If the employer has received information from SSA, the employer must treat all workers the same. That means that if the employer only fires *some* (but not all) workers for whom it received SSA no match letters, the employer may be discriminating against those workers it suspended or terminated. An employer may also be breaking the law if it uses the letter to threaten a group of workers. If your employer tells you that SSA sent notification about a problem with your Social Security number, you can contact Legal Aid at Work or speak with other employment lawyers, or an immigration attorney, to help understand your rights before responding to your employer regarding your Social Security Number, your work authorization, or your immigration status.

## **Disclaimer**

---

This Fact Sheet is intended to provide accurate, general information regarding legal rights relating to employment in California. Yet because laws and legal procedures are subject to frequent change and differing interpretations, Legal Aid at Work cannot ensure the information in this Fact Sheet is current nor be responsible for any use to which it is put. Do

not rely on this information without consulting an attorney or the appropriate agency about your rights in your particular situation.