

Connecting Worker Rights and Health Justice in New Mexico



August 2025

HOW CROSS-MOVEMENT STRATEGY IS FUELING SYSTEMIC CHANGE

This case study spotlights the work of Somos Un Pueblo Unido (Somos), an immigrant-led organization in New Mexico advancing worker and racial justice through grassroots leadership, narrative strategy, and policy change. With support from the Voices for Health Justice program, Somos is building cross-movement power—demonstrating how immigrant workers—long excluded from economic and health systems—can organize for dignity, protection, and systemic change.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOMOS UN PUEBLO UNIDO

THE CHALLENGE

Immigrant workers are a foundational force in New Mexico's economy. In the oil and gas industry—where 43% of workers are Latinx—a recent Somos study found:

- 57% of workers lack health insurance
- 46% have experienced workplace accidents
- 80% know someone who has been injured or killed on the job

In Santa Fe County alone, immigrant workers contributed nearly \$63 million to Social Security and Medicare in 2019—yet *they remain systematically excluded from the very benefits their labor supports.*

Many workers leave the labor force by age 55–60, worn down by physically demanding, dangerous jobs—without access to paid sick leave, childcare, unemployment, or retirement benefits.

“Yes, it’s good pay, but very long hours. As a woman it’s very hard... and I still have to do the things that need to get done at home.”

— Anonymous Somos member

Somos Un Pueblo Unido: From Grassroots to Scaled Impact

Founded in 1995, Somos emerged from the urgent need for collective voice and power in New Mexico’s immigrant communities. Over three decades, it has evolved into a statewide force for worker justice—anchored in grassroots leadership and powered by multi-strategy organizing.



SOMOS MEMBER MARÍA ROMANO STANDS NEAR A PAINTING IN THE HOBBS OFFICES OF SOMOS UN PUEBLO UNIDO. PHOTO COURTESY OF MARÍA ROMANO/ SEARCHLIGHT NEW MEXICO

MILESTONES FOR GROWTH

1995-2015: Trust and Foundation

Built deep community relationships and established credibility and a local leadership pipeline

2015-2020: Strategic Expansion

Formalized a six-pillar strategy for systemic change:

1. Leadership Development—Training community members in organizing, legislative advocacy, and campaign strategy
2. Narrative and Media—Using public campaigns, earned media, and polling to shift public perception and center worker voices
3. Participatory Research and Legal Strategy—Building the power of members to collect data and engage in litigation to expand worker rights
4. Civic Engagement—Advancing naturalization, voter education, and rural community participation

5. Policy Design and Advocacy—Translating lived experience into legislative wins
6. Direct Action—Mobilizing through protests, rallies, and public accountability events

2020-Present: Scaled Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified long-standing inequities for community members in Somos' base. With flexible support from Voices for Health Justice, Somos scaled its infrastructure, reaching 3,500+ members across eight counties while advancing key legislative wins and launching guaranteed income pilots.

The Model in Action: Building Worker Power Across Systems

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: FROM COMMUNITY TO CAPITOL

Somos trains impacted community members to become advocates and campaign leaders. These community members testify at hearings, shape legislation, and stay at the Capitol late into the night to ensure their voices are heard.

Executive Director Marcela Diaz describes the process: "We have a lot of meetings and we talk about the problems in our community—and the things we need to fix them. **When we give it to someone at Somos, they work to make it into a law and [Somos] brings it to the capital.**"

This leadership model reflects a broader truth: "None of this is beyond our reach or our scope if we care to create political space for our people to step into it." — Somos Organizer
Some members spend hours at the state capitol, staying until 10 p.m. for hearings, asking sharp questions, and helping translate lived experience into legislative language.

COMMUNITY-LED RESEARCH: DATA AS A TOOL FOR ORGANIZING

In partnership with the University of New Mexico's Center for Social Policy and New Mexico Voices for Children, Somos equips members to design and conduct surveys and focus groups—ensuring research reflects real-world needs and builds community capacity.

"What we decided to do is tell a powerful story—not about the oil and gas executives in air-conditioned offices, but about us."

— Marcela Diaz, Somos Executive Director

COALITION BUILDING: STRENGTH IN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Somos has anchored statewide coalitions with organizations like NM CAFé, Partnership for Community Action, and El CENTRO de Igualdad y Derechos—leveraging these partnerships to deliver direct relief, shape statewide legislation, and expand their leadership development infrastructure.

Somos is a founding member of multiple statewide coalitions, including:

- Economic Relief Working Group (ERWG),
- Workers Organizing Collaborative, and
- Issue-specific alliances on paid sick leave, tax credits, and more

These coalitions allow Somos to multiply its impact, coordinate strategies, and win on multiple fronts—all while staying accountable to the communities it serves.

POLICY WINS: FROM GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING TO LEGISLATIVE CHANGE

Since 2020, Somos has helped lead efforts that resulted in:

- \$25 million in cash assistance for 25,000 families excluded from federal relief
- Expansion of the Working Families Tax Credit to include undocumented filers
- Paid sick leave for all workers
- New funding for adult education and supplemental income for low-wage workers

What Health Justice Looks Like in Action

GUARANTEED INCOME: A CASE STUDY FOR DIGNITY AND STABILITY

In 2022, Somos and partners in the Workers Organizing Collaborative launched the Guaranteed Income Pilot for Immigrant Families, with support from UpTogether. The pilot provided 330 mixed-status households with \$500/month for one year—grounded in the belief that families know best how to meet their own needs.

"My work is very unstable... With the guaranteed income assistance, I had financial stability for the first time."

— Anonymous Participant

The program was a direct response to the economic volatility immigrant workers face—from last-minute cancellations to industry slowdowns—with few, if any, safety nets. It also served as a proof point: when communities are trusted and resourced, the result is health, stability, and power.

Voices for Health Justice supported this work by helping amplify participant stories, elevate the pilot's impact with policymakers, and connect narrative power to systems change.

SCALE AND SYSTEMS CHANGE

With its coalition of partners, Somos helped deliver:

- \$35M in direct cash transfers to 30,000+ households
- \$6M in city-led funding for 5,000 immigrant families across Albuquerque, Las Cruces, and Santa Fe

At the same time, Somos continued to build infrastructure for long-term change—training leaders, growing membership, and ensuring policy wins were followed by robust implementation and enforcement.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOMOS UN PUEBLO UNIDO

Lessons for the Field:

A Blueprint for Building Cross-Movement Power

1. Break the Silo

Health justice is inseparable from economic justice and immigrant rights. Addressing root causes means working across systems.



2. Invest in Community Leadership

Change happens when those most impacted are not only at the table—but setting the agenda.



3. Use Research to Build Power

Community-led research is not only about data—it's about ownership, narrative, and strategic direction.



4. Build Coalitions that Deliver

The strongest coalitions balance shared goals with clear accountability to grassroots members.

Reliable income, access to benefits, and worker protections reduce stress, improve health outcomes, and build community resilience. **Cross-movement work like this expands the reach—and impact—of the health justice movement.**

Why It Matters:

The Business Case for Cross-Movement Investment

The Voices for Health Justice program was designed to seed, support, and scale this kind of transformative work. By bringing together narrative, organizing, research, and policy capacity, the model strengthens the connective tissue between health justice and broader movements for racial, economic, and immigrant justice.

Somos shows what's possible when communities lead—and when national partners and coalitions help build and amplify their power.

Voices and national partners are continuing to support the New Mexico team as they move into what they've called a “next-level campaign” focused on aging and workers that are eligible for both Medicaid and Medicare. This is a strategic evolution of their power-building work, grounded in the needs of their base and informed by lessons from their previous campaigns.



NEW MEXICO OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & SAFETY BUREAU CHIEF ROBERT GENOWAY MEETS WITH MEMBERS OF SOMOS TO HEAR FROM IMMIGRANTS WHO HAVE FACED POOR WORKING CONDITIONS AND WORKPLACE INJURIES – PHOTO [VIA KSFR](#)

Immigrant Workers Deserve More Than Thanks

Immigrant workers deserve health care, safety, dignity, and a voice to actively shape the systems they contribute to and are impacted by. As Somos continues its work, it embodies a simple but revolutionary truth: **The people who power our economy deserve to thrive within it.**