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Presentation to Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology

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Honourable Senators,

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today on behalf of Migrant Workers Alliance for Change (MWAC) - a coalition of 27 migrant-led organizations and allies. I am also on the Coordinating Committee of the Migrant Rights Network (MRN) - Canada's national migrant alliance. Jointly MWAC and MRN include almost all groups of migrant agricultural workers, care workers, migrant or international students, migrant sex workers, and undocumented people.

According to the most conservative estimate, there are 1.6 million temporary migrants in Canada. In other words, one in every twenty-three people in the country is a non-permanent resident. Migrants are essential workers. Our members grow food and take care of children, sick and the elderly. They are cleaners, construction workers, personal support workers, delivery workers, retail and grocery workers and warehouse workers. We sustain Canada.

Yet migrants have been left out almost entirely from Canada's response to COVID-19. The extent of this exclusion is immense ([see more here](#)), but today, I'll focus on just three major areas. My submission includes the detailed policy proposals on which my remarks are based.

First, **healthcare**. Except for Ontario, all other provinces and territories are denying healthcare, in whole or in part, to many migrants. In many places, even COVID-19 related testing and treatment is not available. Where services are available in policy, they are inaccessible in reality. For example, many migrant farmworkers in Ontario were immediately placed in quarantine on arrival and thus not able to activate their cellphones. As a result they cannot call public health agencies or access health clinics which have moved most services to the phone.

- Please see [a letter from over 200 organizations](#), including most major medical organizations, calling on the federal government to ensure access to healthcare for migrants (EN & FR).

Second, **rights at work and income supports**. Migrants that have continued to work during COVID-19 are facing immense exploitation but are unable to refuse unsafe work because of their temporary immigration status. For example, migrant care workers on tied work permits have seen a massive increase in their hours of work because families are at home. Yet, in most cases, their employers have trapped them in the house, refusing to let them leave even to buy groceries or send remittances to families outside Canada. Similarly, despite the public recognition of how essential migrant agricultural workers are to the integrity of the food system, no meaningful support has been provided to them. Housing conditions make it impossible for farmworkers to socially distance, even during quarantine; illegal deductions are being made from their paychecks; they are being forced to work faster and harder to make up lost revenue for their employers. Federal government inaction has resulted in so many COVID-19 outbreaks on farms that Windsor's Public



Health Agency - home to the highest concentration of migrant farm workers in the country - has declared agricultural farms high-risk settings for the spread of COVID-19.

- Please see our [specific proposals around safe quarantine](#) which the federal government has failed to implement.

Despite how essential migrant workers are to the health and safety of our communities, no wage top-ups have been provided to them.

Where migrants have lost jobs or income, many are excluded from the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). [Lilliana Trejo, an undocumented mother who works as an aide in a long term care home, articulated what many are facing](#): "If we don't die of COVID-19, we will die of anxiety, depression, isolation, and hunger." We have members who have tested positive for COVID-19 but can't access CERB.

According to the last census, 42.9% of non-permanent residents are low-income (as compared to 12.5% of non-immigrants, and 17.9% of immigrants). Lack of income support is causing irreversible consequences. Parents are giving birth unassisted at home. Critical surgeries are being cancelled. Families are selling off cars, their primary mode of transportation for work. Students are being pulled from colleges. There is no return to normal from this.

- Read our [simple, pragmatic proposal to the federal government on ensuring CERB access to migrants without a valid Social Insurance Number](#).

Third, **immigration**. When Canada closed its border in the middle of March, families were separated, workers lost their income and students were unable to return to their studies. While borders have partially re-opened in policy, the reality is that many low-income and racialized migrants and refugees are unable to return, even as many continue to pay rent in Canada. But this is just the tip of the iceberg. Migrant students must get work experience in Canada but are unable to find work during the pandemic ([see our policy proposal on migrant students here](#)). Migrant detainees had to go on a hunger strike to be released from crowded detention centres but are forced to wear ankle bracelets. Laid off care workers will be unable to fulfill their work requirements for permanent residency. Immigration permit processing has slowed down causing immense havoc.

Migrants are doing essential work now, and always have been. But they are unable to access decent work, equal rights or family unification because they do not have full immigration status. This is why we are calling for a **regularization program to immediately extend full immigration status to all non-permanent residents in the country without exclusions**. The only effective crisis response and just recovery from COVID-19 is one where migrants get the rights they deserve.

- See our [proposal for regularization to ensure full immigration status for all here](#).

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