

# Winning COVID-19 Relief Funds for Underserved Communities in Calexico City, California: A Success story of Partnerships and Local Organizing During the Pandemic

## CPEHN'S ANALYSES OF COVID-19 LOCAL RELIEF FUNDS UNDER THE AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN ACT

In 2022, the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network (CPEHN) published [analyses](#) of how major California counties are spending critical COVID-19 relief dollars under the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). California's counties and cities received a total of \$16 billion from the U.S. Treasury to respond to the ongoing COVID-19 public health crisis. Local governments have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to co-create priorities with their local constituents and invest these funds towards public health and racial equity.

To support equitable use of ARPA dollars at the local levels, CPEHN partnered with the Imperial Valley Equity and Justice Coalition (IVEJC) who was organizing a campaign in Calexico City. CPEHN provided analyses and education for the Coalition organizers, breaking down the Treasury's equity guidelines and sharing best practices from other local governments to help make a case for the Coalition's demands. CPEHN also sent a letter directly to Calexico City Council elevating the Coalition's campaign.



Calexico City is located in Imperial County, at the border between the United States and Mexico.

Photo Source: Adobe Stock

## COVID-19 RELIEF FUNDS IN CALEXICO CITY, CALIFORNIA

Calexico City is located in Imperial County, an agricultural area close to the U.S.– Mexico border. The City serves as a [central hub for thousands of farmworkers](#), many of whom commute daily from Mexico. More than [97% of the city residents are Latino/a/x](#) and the majority speak Spanish at home. Calexico was particularly hard hit by the pandemic: many long-standing inequities that farmworkers experience including low-paying work, crowded working and living conditions, and lack of access to health care [exacerbated the impacts of COVID-19](#). Statewide data show that Latino/a/x communities were [overrepresented in COVID-19 cases and deaths](#) compared to the rest of the population. Additionally, Imperial County was one of the most impacted counties in California, with a COVID-19 death rate more than [double](#) the rate of the next highest-hit county.

Calexico City received \$9.6 million in relief funds under ARPA in 2021 and 2022. In 2021, the City Council voted to spend \$1.28 million ARPA funds to replace Police and Fire Department vehicles, including \$600,000 for the Police Department, and, subsequently another \$1 million on bonus payments to city employees. In February 2022, the City further proposed a spending plan of [\\$7.2 million in ARPA funds](#) mainly to update the city's infrastructure, which largely neglected to provide relief for its farmworkers and other essential workers most impacted by COVID-19. Additionally, a recent California State Auditor [report](#) found that because Calexico City presents its budgets in English only, these critical funding decisions remain difficult for the majority Spanish-speaking population to understand or engage with.

## ADVOCATING FOR CRITICAL SUPPORT FOR FARMWORKERS AND OTHER UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES IN CALEXICO CITY

The [Imperial Valley Equity and Justice Coalition](#) (IVEJC) was created by local organizers in 2020 to respond to the COVID-19 crisis and to address structural inequities such as environmental pollution, lack of access to health care, and lack of civic participation. IVEJC approached the City's ARPA funds as an opportunity to address long-neglected community needs especially of agricultural and service workers and immigrants, and to bring their input into the City's budgetary process. IVEJC partnered with both state-wide organizations like CPEHN and local community organizations during their campaign.

After the City Council released its proposal in 2022 for the remaining \$7.2 million ARPA funds, IVEJC organizers mobilized local communities to advocate for a more equitable distribution of these funds. IVEJC hosted community teach-in's to share why this funding was so critical to the larger Calexico community, and conducted a [community survey](#) to show City elected officials how COVID-19 recovery funds can be better spent towards local communities. Together, IVEJC organizers and community residents made public comments, sent in petition letters, and wrote op-eds to advocate for their demands.

Due to the Coalition's advocacy, in March 2022, Calexico City agreed to redirect its remaining \$7.2 million ARPA funds, with a focus on providing \$1 million towards direct relief for farmworkers and other essential workers and \$3 million on rehabilitating public facilities in downtown Calexico City.

This powerful and inspiring example of local advocacy in Calexico City shows that partnerships between statewide policy advocates and local organizers can drive meaningful changes. We hope the win in Calexico City can inspire further community action and community-driven responses in more parts of California.



*Pictured: Calexico City residents at a City Council Meeting on March 22nd, 2022, the meeting where the ARPA Plan put forward by IVEJC was approved. Photo courtesy of IVEJC.*

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