



Building Capacity, Investing in People:

The Immigration Legal Services Support Project

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Executive Summary

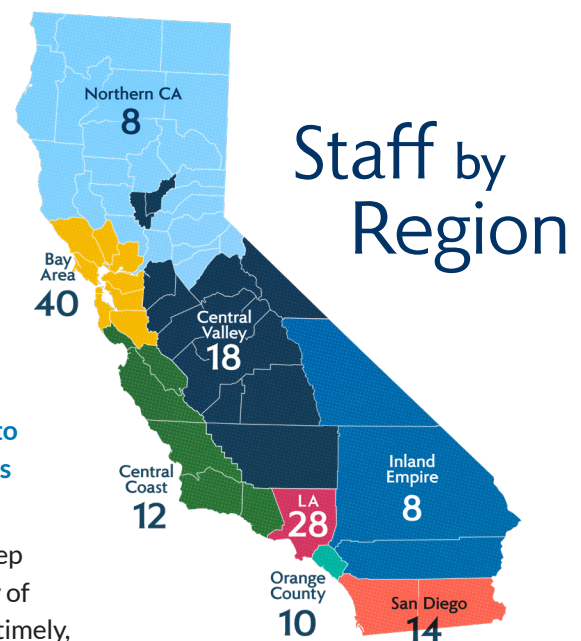
The Immigration Legal Services Support Project (ILSSP), administered by the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC), in partnership with the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), addressed California's urgent need for expanded immigration legal services capacity. With a \$30 million investment, the project supported 86 nonprofit legal services organizations to hire and train additional attorneys and Department of Justice Accredited Representatives, significantly increasing access to affordable, high-quality immigration legal services. As a result, providers across the state are now better equipped to meet the legal needs of California's immigrant communities, from naturalization to removal defense, ensuring more individuals receive the representation they deserve.

Background Information

The Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC), in partnership with the California Department of Social Services, launched the Immigration Legal Services Support Project in 2023 in response to the critical need for increased affordable immigration legal services capacity within the state of California. This initiative aimed to strengthen and expand the ability of nonprofit legal services providers to meet the complex and growing demand for immigration legal assistance by funding and supporting the recruitment of additional legal practitioners.

To make this possible, CDSS allocated a one-time \$30 million investment to bolster the staffing capacity of 86 immigration legal services organizations across California.

This investment was not only a financial commitment but also a strategic step toward ensuring that immigrant communities throughout the state — many of whom face significant barriers to accessing legal assistance — could obtain timely, affordable, and competent representation.



Context and Need for the Project

California is home to the largest immigrant population in the United States, including approximately 2.7 million undocumented individuals and an estimated 2.3 million lawful permanent residents who may be eligible to naturalize. These populations face a wide range of legal needs, from obtaining Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) protections to defending themselves in removal proceedings. However, access to affordable, competent immigration legal representation remains limited.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) Recognition and Accreditation (R&A) program offers a critical avenue for nonprofits to increase their legal services capacity. The program provides accreditation to non-attorney staff at nonprofits to practice immigration law after rigorous training and mentorship and a lengthy application process. It also gives “recognized” status to nonprofits who are equipped to hire these DOJ Accredited Representatives. Nationally, CLINIC is a leader in providing training and support to aspiring DOJ Accredited Representatives. CLINIC has long understood this program to be a critical opportunity to expand access to legal representation nationwide, and at a lower cost to nonprofits, as well to empower representatives from lower-income communities to be able to represent their own community members in immigration proceedings.

In 2023, there were 263 nonprofit organizations in California recognized by the U.S. Department of Justice to provide immigration legal services through Accredited Representatives. While many of these organizations were already receiving funding from CDSS to provide pro bono services, they consistently reported that they lacked sufficient staff to meet the overwhelming demand. Without additional support, many immigrants risked falling through the cracks — unable to secure legal representation in critical matters before the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), or the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA).



Project Goals and Objectives

The ILSSP was designed to address these challenges by:

1. **Increasing Staffing Capacity:** Funding the hiring and training of additional DOJ Accredited Representatives and attorneys within nonprofit immigration legal services organizations.
2. **Enhancing Quality of Legal Services:** Ensuring that newly hired staff receive comprehensive legal training to deliver high-quality immigration representation.
3. **Expanding Service Areas:** Supporting providers in offering a broad range of critical immigration legal services, including:



Deferred Action for
Childhood Arrivals
(DACA)



Naturalization and
Citizenship



Affirmative
Immigration Remedies



Education and
Outreach



Removal
Defense

Implementation and Approach

CLINIC was selected by CDSS to serve as the Program Administrator for the ILSSP due to its longstanding expertise in capacity building and its national leadership in supporting organizations through the DOJ Recognition and Accreditation (R&A) program. As Program Administrator, CLINIC played a dual role in executing the following:

- **Grant Administration:** Overseeing the distribution of funds to 86 selected subgrantee organizations, ensuring compliance with project requirements, and monitoring outcomes.
- **Training and Technical Assistance:** Delivering intensive training programs, mentorship, and technical support to organizations and their staff. This included providing tailored curricula to prepare DOJ R&A candidates for accreditation and supporting attorneys in building their legal expertise.

Participation in the ILSSP was competitive. Eligible organizations were required to demonstrate an established immigration legal services program with a minimum of three years of operation, present evidence of need for additional capacity, and commit to achieving the staffing and service delivery benchmarks outlined in their individual workplans.



Participant Perspective

“ILSSP has changed my life and career. I have become a better advocate because of the trainings that I have received. I have learned to better time manage, prepare for interviews, and also better analyze and research for each case that we take...I feel more confident in the work that I do and am so grateful for the opportunity that has been given to me. Through this year of practice as an accredited representative, it has motivated to move forward with applying for my full accreditation so that I can have more opportunity to expand my abilities to advocate for the immigrant population. In the future I also plan to go back to school and get my law degree.”

Diana Payan

DOJ Accredited Representative, International Institute of Los Angeles

Outcomes and Impact

Through the ILSSP, 86 nonprofit immigration legal service providers across California were able to recruit and train new DOJ Accredited Representatives and attorneys, thereby substantially increasing their capacity to serve immigrant communities. These investments have enabled organizations to:

- **Expand their service delivery** in critical areas such as naturalization, DACA renewals, and removal defense.
- **Reach more clients** in underserved areas of the state.
- **Build sustainable legal teams** that will continue to serve immigrant communities beyond the life of the grant.

Investments Made

The ILSSP represented a significant financial commitment to strengthening California's immigration legal services infrastructure. **Of the \$30 million allocated by the CDSS, \$25,253,368 directly supported the hiring and retention of 138 project staff across eight regions in California. This investment funded 105 Department of Justice Accredited Representatives and 33 attorneys, which has led to an almost 25% increase in the capacity of DOJ R&A in the state, dramatically expanding the capacity of nonprofit legal services organizations to meet the needs of immigrant communities.**

The remaining funds were utilized by CLINIC to administer the project effectively. As Program Administrator, CLINIC provided comprehensive oversight, technical assistance, and training to subgrantees. This included the hiring of five dedicated staff members within CLINIC to manage grant compliance, coordinate training, deliver legal and programmatic support, and ensure the project's success. CLINIC additionally relied on the support of additional in-house staff to facilitate smooth program administration. This balanced allocation of resources between direct service staffing and centralized administration enabled ILSSP to achieve both immediate service expansion and long-term sustainability for participating organizations.

| Region | Number of DOJ Positions | Number of Attorney Positions | Final Funding in Dollar Amount | |
|---------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| Northern California | 7 | 1 | \$1,458,153.00 | |
| Central Valley | 14 | 4 | \$3,054,469.30 | |
| Central Coast | 11 | 1 | \$2,020,512.00 | |
| Bay Area | 30 | 10 | \$7,527,839.00 | |
| Los Angeles | 20 | 8 | \$5,229,943.00 | |
| Inland Empire | 6 | 2 | \$1,405,283.70 | |
| Orange County | 7 | 3 | \$1,978,002.00 | |
| San Diego | 10 | 4 | \$2,579,166.00 | |
| Total | 105 | 33 | Project Staff | Funding |
| | | | 138 | \$25,253,368.00 |

Sustainability

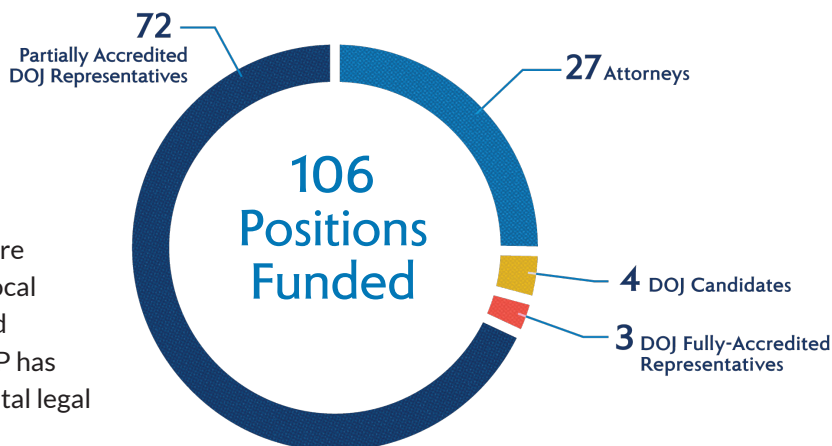
A key objective of the Immigration Legal Services Support Project (ILSSP) was to create lasting capacity within California's immigration legal services sector. Beyond immediate staffing increases, the project sought to ensure that organizations could retain the expertise and momentum developed during the grant period.

106 of the 138 positions funded (76.8%) remain in place following the conclusion of the project. (27 attorneys, 4 DOJ candidates, 3 DOJ Fully Accredited Representatives, 72 DOJ Partially Accredited Representatives.)

This high retention rate underscores the project's success in strengthening organizational infrastructure and embedding immigration legal expertise within local communities. By building a robust pipeline of trained attorneys and Accredited Representatives, the ILSSP has left a durable legacy, ensuring continued access to vital legal services for immigrants across California.

Unlike many previous grant initiatives that focus primarily on tracking the number of cases completed or clients served, the ILSSP was intentionally designed as an investment in human capital and organizational capacity. This represented a marked departure from precedent. By prioritizing the recruitment, training, and retention of attorneys and DOJ Accredited Representatives, the project recognized that sustainable access to justice requires strong, well-staffed institutions not just short-term increases in case processing. **This people-centered approach has equipped organizations with the skills, infrastructure, and resilience needed to continue serving immigrant communities long after the project's conclusion.**

The ILSSP represents a significant step toward closing the gap between the demand for immigration legal services and the capacity of providers to meet that demand. By investing in human capital — trained and accredited legal practitioners — California has strengthened its infrastructure for immigrant legal assistance in a way that will have lasting effects.



Participant Perspective

"ILSSP has had a profound impact on my personal and professional journey. It has provided me with consistent guidance, accountability, and invaluable training, all of which have laid the foundation for my successful application for DOJ accreditation. Through ILSSP, I've gained the confidence and competence to navigate the complexities of immigration law, which is essential not only for advancing my legal career but also for serving vulnerable communities.

"... ILSSP has equipped me with the tools to make a real difference in the lives of individuals and families who urgently need representation and advocacy. I'm truly grateful for the support and empowerment ILSSP has provided — it has not only shaped my career but reaffirmed my commitment to justice and service."

Juan Diego Hernandez

DOJ Accredited Representative, Formerly at Catholic Charities of Sacramento, Inc.



Phase One: Project Planning and Preparation

- Identify partner organizations, issue MOUs, and begin distribution of funds.
- Hire CLINIC staff and organize project systems and procedures.

Phase Two: Project Launch and Recruitment

- Support recruitment and hiring of new legal staff (known as fellows).
- Begin immigration law and case management training.
- Work on DOJ accreditation applications for fellows.
- Begin cohort calls and extra support.

Phase Three: Training and Technical Support Phase

- Continue training and support for fellows and staff at partner orgs.
- Help fellows submit DOJ accreditation applications by end of year one.

Phase Four: Long-Term Sustainability Phase and Closeout

- Most DOJ accreditation applications have been approved.
- Fellows put training into action, take on their own cases.
- Continue mentorship and case management support.
- Shift training and support to focus on long-term sustainability and agency support systems.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations



Invest in Human Capital to Build Lasting Capacity

A critical lesson from the ILSSP project is the value of funding staff positions rather than tying funding strictly to case numbers or outputs. Historically, many funding models in immigration legal services have provided support based on the number of cases completed — for example, a set amount per DACA application. While this approach addresses immediate needs, it restricts organizations from adapting to policy changes or shifting community priorities. By contrast, funding staff creates institutional knowledge, expertise, and continuity, allowing organizations to flexibly deploy personnel where they are most needed. This model not only strengthens organizational resilience but also ensures that immigrant communities continue to receive high-quality, sustainable legal support over the long term.



Strengthen Existing Programs, Regardless of Size

The ILSSP demonstrated that building upon existing infrastructure is an effective strategy for increasing statewide capacity. Participating organizations were already vetted grantees of the California Department of Social Services, with proven experience providing immigration legal services and authorized staff in place. By investing in this foundation, ILSSP maximized the impact of added staff capacity while ensuring that resources were directed to organizations capable of quickly expanding services. Notably, over 40% of participating organizations began the project with four or fewer legal staff, underscoring the importance of supporting even small programs. CLINIC supplemented this investment with technical assistance, offering guidance on program management, legal supervision, ethical considerations, and volunteer coordination. This combination of financial support and capacity-building resources enabled organizations of all sizes to strengthen their service delivery.



Cultivate Organizational Buy-In and Sustainability

Long-term sustainability requires intentional strategies to foster organizational buy-in. ILSSP highlighted the value of establishing peer learning cohorts, providing regular one-on-one support between project managers, and maintaining open channels for capacity-building dialogue. These structures encouraged knowledge sharing, built a sense of collective investment in the project, and supported participating organizations in navigating operational challenges. Future initiatives should prioritize such relationship-based supports, which reinforce organizational commitment and help ensure sustainability beyond the grant period.



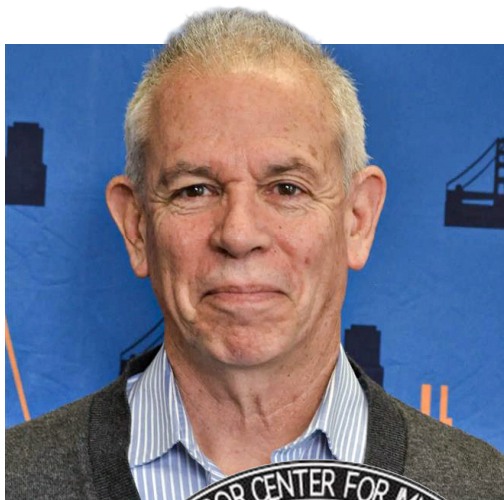
Prioritize DOJ Accreditation Pathways

A sustainable immigration legal services workforce depends on the continued investment in DOJ Accredited Representatives. Accreditation enables non-attorney staff to provide authorized immigration legal representation, expanding the pool of qualified practitioners in a field where demand consistently outpaces supply. By funding DOJ accreditation candidates and ensuring access to robust training and mentorship, projects like ILSSP help create a durable pipeline of skilled representatives who can remain embedded in their communities. Additionally, funders who already invest in legal services can strengthen these pathways by ensuring that resources are accessible to DOJ Recognized organizations — a strategy deeply rooted in California that has enabled programs to expand and thrive. Unfortunately, most funding opportunities exclude organizations without attorneys on staff, making them inaccessible to DOJ Recognized programs.



Address Attorney Recruitment Challenges

The project also underscored ongoing challenges in recruiting and retaining immigration attorneys. Many organizations, particularly smaller nonprofits and those in rural areas, reported difficulty filling attorney positions due to competitive job markets and compensation disparities. Future funding initiatives should explore creative solutions to address these barriers — such as loan repayment assistance, fellowship models, or targeted recruitment strategies — to ensure that attorney positions remain viable and accessible across the state. This challenge underscores the importance of investing in legal staff who are already embedded in the organization and assisting them in expanding their legal skills and abilities through DOJ accreditation. This project was able to overcome these challenges by building flexibility and planning for contingencies. For example, programs that hired Juris Doctorate candidates pursuing licensure were prepared for the possibility that staff might not pass the bar exam; their work plans positioned these candidates to instead obtain full DOJ accreditation.



Organization Perspective

“As organizations struggle to keep up with the demand for increased legal services, developing a stable, highly skilled staff is key to meeting the needs of our community with limited nonprofit budgets. Our overall involvement in ILSSP and with CLINIC has shaped our agency in many ways, largely through skills and capacity building to be a better provider of services and able to reach a growing number of clients.

“CLINIC and CDSS took a bold step by focusing on capacity building as an approach to meeting the needs of our immigrant population high quality legal immigration services. I would strongly recommend continuing this approach. The investment is tremendous way to enable agencies to grow their skills and capacity which allows for more high quality services to be provided.... Despite great strides forward thousands of immigrants needing quality affordable services are not able to find them. Project like this are critical.”

Tom Ryan

Executive Director, San Francisco Labor Council/AFL-CIO- WE RISE

Conclusion

The Immigration Legal Services Support Project (ILSSP) demonstrated the power of investing in human capital and organizational capacity as a pathway to expanding access to justice for immigrant communities. Through a \$30 million investment, 86 nonprofit organizations across California were able to recruit, train, and retain 138 immigration legal staff, 76.8% of whom continue to serve their communities today. By prioritizing staff development over case-count metrics, the project built long-term resilience, strengthened institutional expertise, and left behind a durable legacy that will benefit immigrant families for years to come.

The lessons from ILSSP are clear: strategic investment in staff capacity creates sustainable impact. By equipping organizations with attorneys and DOJ Accredited Representatives, states can ensure that immigrant communities are not only served in the short term but are supported by stable, knowledgeable advocates who can adapt to shifting policies and emerging needs.

This project offers a replicable model for other states and jurisdictions. With thoughtful funding, robust training, and intentional capacity-building, governments and philanthropic partners can foster stronger, more responsive immigration legal services ecosystems nationwide.

We call on funders, policymakers, and state governments to build upon California’s example. By investing in people — the attorneys, Accredited Representatives, and legal advocates who form the backbone of immigration legal services — we can create an enduring infrastructure for justice. Replicating the ILSSP model across the country will not only expand access to critical legal assistance but will also help ensure that immigrant communities everywhere have the support they need to thrive.

Acknowledgements

The Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC), extends its deep gratitude to all who contributed to the success of the Immigration Legal Services Support Project (ILSSP). We thank the California Department of Social Services for its vision and investment in expanding access to immigration legal services, and we recognize the dedication of CLINIC staff who administered the project, provided training, and supported organizations throughout its duration. Most importantly, we acknowledge the 86 nonprofit organizations across California whose commitment to immigrant communities and partnership with CLINIC made this project possible. Their trust and collaboration were essential in ensuring the impact and sustainability of this initiative.

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