



The National Partnership for New Americans: Building an Immigrant Legal Services Network

DURING THE PAST DECADE, THE 47 MILLION FOREIGN-BORN PEOPLE in the United States have experienced a wildly convulsing political climate. For years they saw the tantalizing possibility of comprehensive immigration reform. This gave way to the reality of the limited protections of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). More recently, immigrants have faced a rising tide of xenophobia, detention and deportation, family separations, hostile demagoguery over building walls, and the scapegoating of immigrants as criminals and terrorists.

Each of these twists and turns has unleashed massive demands for trusted legal services on behalf of immigrant communities. The National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA) and its 37 dues-paying and affiliated organizations in 30 states increasingly have stepped up to meet these challenges. Over the past 10 years, the NPNA network of immigrant legal service providers has grown from five to 28, and NPNA and its members have also been leaders in the campaigns to win immigration and naturalization policy reforms and to protect immigrant families from deportation.

“Over the years, as our organizations have matured, we’ve recognized that legal services are essential to protect, empower and serve our communities,” says NPNA Founding Co-Chair Gustavo Torres, executive director of CASA. “NPNA has worked systematically with immigrant organizations across the nation to build our legal capacity. There are no better groups for empowering our leaders with information to protect our families, and for providing legal services in a trusted environment.”

The Seattle Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs, a member of Cities for Citizenship, partnered with dozens of community-based organizations, including NPNA member OneAmerica, and multiple city departments to organize the Seattle United for Immigrants and Refugees Mega-Workshop, which offered free assistance to 1,026 immigrants who needed help applying for U.S. citizenship.

PHOTO CREDIT: Alan Alabastro Photography



The Need

The immigration legal services field is starved for additional capacity. Immigrants have no federal right to appointed counsel in immigration court—they must find private attorneys, whom they often cannot afford, meaning that an estimated 86 percent fend for themselves against a government-trained attorney. Meanwhile, the 15,000 attorneys in the American Immigration Lawyers Association represent one legal advocate for every 1,786 immigrants who are not naturalized citizens.

The gulf between supply and demand has been widening for a number of reasons:

- Deportations of individuals living in the U.S. grew 25 percent in fiscal year 2017.
- Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is currently detaining an average of 44,631 people daily, the highest number in its history.
- More than 1 million immigrants currently have tenuous legal status under DACA (700,000 undocumented youth) or TPS (325,000 recipients), with ongoing legal fights to end these programs by the Trump Administration.
- About 8.9 million lawful permanent residents are eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship (and their incentive to do so keeps growing).
- Some 2.7 million immigrants have applied for U.S. citizenship in the past three years, as wait times have doubled.
- The administration has limited asylum for women fleeing domestic violence, others escaping violence, and those entering the U.S. outside a port of entry.
- The horrors of family separation, family incarceration, extended immigration detention and release with ankle bracelets have become common in immigrant communities.

Amy Taylor, Legal Director of NPNA member group Make the Road New York, sums up the impact on her organization and others. “Cases are being denied that never were before, and it’s a strain on the team in terms of resources, staff well being, burnout and second-hand trauma,” she says.

Vision and Strategy

NPNA believes that legal services are not only the key to preserving a place for immigrants here in the U.S., but also a critically important strategy in support of immigrant leadership development and community power building. Legal services provide the connective tissue between member organizations and their clients. Immigrants who come to an NPNA affiliate with a transactional need, like a U.S. citizenship application, often begin a transformational

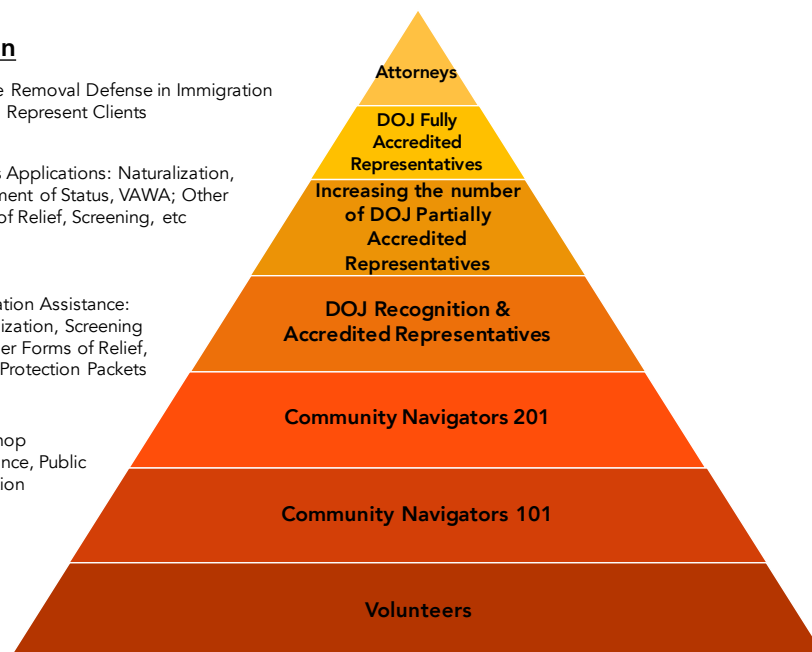
experience, as they learn about other programs and campaigns that can help them integrate into civic life—as workers, as students, and as politically engaged citizens.

“It’s had a gateway effect on our other programs,” says **Nicole Melaku, Executive Director of Colorado Immigrants Rights Coalition**. “The individuals we assist through our legal services come back to us to register to vote, and then they get involved in a legislative campaign. It’s a civic engagement continuum.”

NPNA Legal Service Empowerment Model

Function

- Practice Removal Defense in Immigration Courts, Represent Clients
- Process Applications: Naturalization, Adjustment of Status, VAWA; Other Forms of Relief, Screening, etc
- Application Assistance: Naturalization, Screening for Other Forms of Relief, Family Protection Packets
- Workshop Assistance, Public Education



NPNA’s Legal Service Empowerment Model is pyramid-like, starting with volunteers and specialists known as “Community Navigators,”

typically immigrant women who are trained and often hired to be intake workers performing roles similar to paralegals. These Navigators are in and of the community, bringing trusted relationships and cultural competence that ties legal services work to grassroots organizing and leadership development. For cases requiring more complex legal assistance, NPNA provides DOJ-accredited representatives. Finally, staff or pro bono attorneys represent clients in court for deportation and other cases.

“The Navigators model builds trust in the community and expands capacity of lawyers to focus on the things that represents the best uses of their time,” says **Laura Tuell, firmwide Pro Bono Counsel for Jones Day**, a lead partner in training the navigators. “There are just not enough immigration lawyers to do the work that needs to get done, and Navigators culturally understand the population better than most attorneys. And if we do more work to train Navigators to assist lawyers, it would help lawyers serve a ton more immigrants.”

NPNA's Impact

NPNA has built a formidable legal services infrastructure that quantifiably reverberates:

- **Total Members:** 37 dues paying and affiliated organizations, in 30 states
- **Total Annual Legal Service Budgets of NPNA Members:** \$13.3 million
- **Legal Services Re grants since 2010:** \$13 million
- **Total Attorneys on Staff:** 74
- **Total DOJ Accredited Staff:** 78
- **Naturalization Fee Waivers:** 175,000 per year on average since 2012 (due to process improvements committed to NPNA by then-USCIS Director Alejandro Mayorkas)
- **Public Education:** 235,788 individuals reached in 2017-2018
- **Naturalization:** 11,054 applications completed 2017-2018, and 136,792 total since 2010
- **DACA Renewals:** 9,375 applications completed 2018, and 46,971 total since 2012
- **Screened for Other Forms of Relief:** 24,380 individuals screened in 2018
- **Community Navigators:** 1,386 trained in 2018, and 11,387 total since 2015

On a human scale, these statistics represent immigrants naturalized, voting, and integrated into American society; DACA-eligible young people who can work, study and travel in the only country they have ever known; and hard-working American taxpayers who are spared from the Kafkaesque horrors of family separations, detentions and expulsions.

“I worked closely with NPNA as both the director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and later as the deputy secretary of homeland security,” says **Alejandro Mayorkas, who is now a partner in the law firm of Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale & Dorr**. “There are few groups clearer on the importance of citizenship and legal services for immigrants, or more tenacious and effective in ensuring that citizenship remains affordable for working poor immigrants.”

Moving Forward

As the political environment has deteriorated for immigrants, NPNA's members have responded heroically. The 10-year strategy of building immigration legal services has met the moment when this infrastructure is most desperately needed.

“In 2017, when we knew there was going to be an increase in enforcement, so we trained 80 leaders across the state to become first responders, including 60 attorneys and law students,” says **Camila Herrera, Integration Director for the Tennessee Immigrant & Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC)**. This preparation paid off when immigration agents showed up in Morristown, Tennessee, in April 2018 and detained 97 slaughterhouse workers. TIRRC mobilized community support, media attention and critical legal services, as a result of which many of these immigrants were released on bond and are able to work while they fight their deportation cases.

Beyond deportations, there are many evolving threats around which nimble immigration legal services will be required from NPNA and its members. These include the proposed “Public Charge” rule, and the increasing urgency of naturalization as the ability for the working poor to naturalize diminishes and U.S. citizenship becomes a privilege for wealthy immigrants.

In addition, the future lawful status of both 700,000 DACA recipients and 325,000 Temporary Protected Status holders is winding its way toward the newly more conservative U.S. Supreme Court. As Central Americans flee their violent

homelands, there will be more and more demand for legal services on the border and eventually in our cities.

The work of the NPNA network over the past decade has demonstrated the deeply strategic nature of immigrant legal services, tied to organizing and the empowerment of immigrant women. In the current environment, these services and this model desperately need to be strengthened, formalized and resourced with both public and private dollars, especially regarding smaller organizations in newer port-of-entry states that often face the most hostile political climates.

As a part of NPNA's 2018-2020 Strategic Plan, the Board of Directors voted to create the **"NPNA Family Protection and Immigration Legal Services Fund"** to bolster immigration legal services and provide support to families. The fund will help develop the quality, trusted immigration legal trainings and services of NPNA members. The NPNA Board also has launched the **"New American Dreams Platform"** with national advocacy to protect access to naturalization and "Full Citizenship For All," and to win public funding for immigration legal services for "Access to Justice,"

Retiring **U.S. Rep. Luis Gutierrez** will be helping to push these efforts forward in his new role as NPNA Senior Policy Advisor. "I will travel the nation to help the magnificent immigrant coalitions that are NPNA's members work for expanded immigration level services, naturalization, and to protect families from cruel deportations," he says. "I have traveled across the nation with NPNA for the past 10 years and will be proud to support their unique ability to combine immigrant legal services with policy advocacy and the training and strengthening of their member organizations."

