

Inside **Philanthropy**

How Foundations and Local Governments Partnered to Provide Legal Support to Immigrants in L.A.

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In recent weeks, the shocking images of Border Patrol agents on horseback wielding leather reins as whips [pursuing Haitian refugees](#) at the U.S.-Mexico border, and immigration reform advocates [confronting Sen. Kyrsten Sinema in a bathroom](#) have illustrated that immigration remains one of the country's most pressing and contentious issues.

Naturally, one of the biggest focal points of immigration reform is deportation. Every year, thousands of individuals and families are removed from the country; many lack legal counsel. In Los Angeles, a public-private partnership is attempting to rectify this issue. What started as a philanthropy-backed pilot project has [since been adopted](#) as a

permanent program within L.A. County, and organizers behind the program see potential for the model to extend across the state and beyond.

Established in 2017, the Los Angeles Justice Fund (LAJF) is a collaboration between the Weingart Foundation, the California Community Foundation (CCF), the City of Los Angeles and Los Angeles County to provide legal representation to individuals and families facing deportation and removal proceedings. In Los Angeles, more than two-thirds of immigrants who were detained lacked access to legal counsel, according to CCF. This is a major problem for those facing deportation, as [studies have shown](#) that immigrants who have legal counsel are five times more likely to be released from detention than those who do not have legal counsel.

The fund supports [numerous nonprofit legal providers](#), including Asian Americans Advancing Justice, the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN), the Coalition for Human Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA), Esperanza Immigrant Rights Project, Immigrant Defenders Law Center, Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, One Justice, and the USC Gould Immigration Clinic.

The Weingart Foundation provided the initial investment, making a three-year commitment to launch the pilot program. Both the Weingart Foundation and CCF pledged \$1 million. When the program launched, the city committed [\\$2 million for the pilot](#), while the [county committed \\$3 million](#). To date, the L.A. Justice Fund has granted \$7.4 million to increase legal representation for people facing deportation and removal proceedings in L.A. County.

“The good news is that the county and the city have really expanded their commitment to the program,” said Weingart Foundation President and CEO Miguel Santana. “The county has funded the L.A. Justice Fund for over three years... and increased the amount of support, and so did the city. So now, what started out as a philanthropic-led effort has really been embraced by the city and the county.”

Last year, the pilot program was [extended for another year](#). Now, L.A. County has made the program permanent, ingrained in government priorities. Going forward, it will be known as the Los Angeles Immigrant Community Legal Defense Program.

This outcome represents a kind of Holy Grail for some philanthropies, which often bankroll experimental initiatives on a limited scale in hopes that it will be picked up and expanded by the public sector. It's a way that even relatively small foundations can spark a huge impact.

“This is a good model of philanthropy initiating an idea, seed funding it, and then government really embracing it and then taking it to the scale that’s needed,” said Santana. “And so for us, this is a great example of philanthropy partnering with government to support people who need defense and need access to services.”

Circumstances that led to the fund’s creation

The L.A. Justice Fund is only the latest of many partnerships between the Weingart Foundation and CFF.

“In Los Angeles, there’s a long-established collaboration among foundations to work together among common issues, common concerns, and it’s not uncommon that it’s the Weingart Foundation and the California Community Foundation who many times lead those efforts,” said Santana.

The two organizations have also collaborated through the Committee for Greater Los Angeles, which Santana chairs. Last year, the committee commissioned a report titled [“No Going Back: Policies for an Equitable and Inclusive Los Angeles.”](#) In its section on immigration, the report noted that more than 400 executive actions on immigration policy were issued during the Trump administration, most of which [garnered outrage](#) and protests. Policies impacted refugee resettlement, the asylum system, border enforcement, the DACA program, and much more.

“The fund was frankly inspired by the Trump administration,” said Santana. Prior to the Trump administration, immigration enforcement largely centered on immigrants who had or were committing a crime.

“The Trump administration really changed its efforts and started implementing some of the raids in workplaces and in neighborhoods,” Santana said. “And so there was a concern that our community wasn’t prepared for that, and that there should be an effort to create a fund that would support an infrastructure of legal services for immigrants facing deportation.”

A key point to note is that while the LAJF was created in reaction to the Trump administration’s anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric, it is meant to be a continuous system of support, regardless of who is in the White House.

“The needs right now are the same,” said Antonia Hernandez, president and CEO of the California Community Foundation (CCF). “People are still getting deported. People are still being picked up. And so the need for these types of infrastructures will continue.”

One of the major concerns related to deportation is that it affects entire families and communities, not just the individual. “We were very concerned because what people don’t think about is that that one person who was taken, whether it’s a man or a woman, was supporting a family,” Hernandez said.

The “No Going Back” report noted that about 490,000 children in L.A. County live with at least one undocumented parent. These children, of whom about 90% are U.S. citizens, face the threat of family separation due to deportation. The report also stressed how immigrants “form an essential fabric of society,” noting that immigrants have played a “critical role” during the pandemic.

“Approximately half of the essential workforce is made up of immigrants, including half of the healthcare essential workforce,” the report found.

Hernandez added that it is imperative for the county and city to recognize that immigrants, both documented and undocumented, are taxpayers, and as such, should be eligible to receive the benefits that the county and city provide.

According to the report, immigrants have been especially hard-hit by COVID-19, and despite playing such a crucial role during the pandemic, have been largely excluded from government support. The Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act excluded undocumented individuals and mixed-status families from receiving stimulus checks. At the state level, California’s Disaster Relief Fund allocated cash benefits of \$500 for undocumented immigrants, but there were only [150,000 slots available](#). California is home to about [2.4 million undocumented individuals](#).

The report added, “Safeguarding the livelihoods of all Angelenos... requires continued interventions against a federal government that intends on excluding and punishing immigrants and their families.... A response at the local level requires creative solutions that eliminate discrimination and xenophobia from our systems to ensure that immigrant communities have equal access to the same social safety net.”

Among its proposed policy solutions is the L.A. Justice Fund.

California’s history with immigrants

California has long had one of the highest immigrant populations in the U.S., dating back as far as the 17th century, according to the [American Immigration Council](#). In fact,

its large immigrant population is one of the predominant reasons that California became the most populous state in the nation.

Although Californians' [attitudes toward immigrants](#) are largely positive, that wasn't always the case. Santana noted that the LAJF shows how much the state of California has evolved over time. In 1994, California voters passed [Proposition 187](#), euphemistically known as the "Save Our State" referendum. The initiative would have restricted undocumented immigrants from accessing the state's public services, including education and healthcare. It would also have forced educators and healthcare providers to report anyone suspected of being undocumented to state and federal authorities.

Ultimately, a federal court ruled Proposition 187 unconstitutional, but voters' acceptance of it cast a harsh light on Californians' unfavorable attitudes toward immigrants.

"It really says so much about the evolution of the politics in California, and how Californians have really evolved to be much more welcoming and embracing of the diversity of the state," said Santana. "When you think about it historically, this is such an important moment in California history and really speaks to how much we've changed and evolved."

Expansion to a statewide level

Some of the key findings from the pilot program include the importance of building partnerships among nonprofits that usually don't work together, in order to make sure that there is sufficient coverage throughout Southern California. The other major lesson is ensuring that there is enough outreach to communities so that they are familiar with the fund's services, should they need them.

The Weingart Foundation's commitment to the LAJF is in line with its priorities. According to Santana, the foundation has made issues of equity and justice the "centerpiece and key" to its mission and purpose. Weingart is looking to empower communities, especially those that have been historically marginalized in the region.

"Providing support to our immigrant community is really a central part of our mission and purpose," Santana said. "For the Weingart Foundation, there's no better personification of what we're about."

Perhaps one of the biggest accomplishments of the fund is that with its success, it has provided a partnership model that can be replicated in other cities and at the state level.

Public-private partnerships have received heightened attention in light of several societal challenges compounded by the pandemic. For many, they illustrate that complex issues require attention from multiple sectors.

The [California Dignity for Families Fund](#), which is managed by Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees, is following a similar approach to LAJF to provide immigrant families and unaccompanied children with urgent humanitarian relief and assistance. The fund is aiming to raise an initial \$20 million as part of a private-public collaboration with Gov. Gavin Newsom. According to the fund's website, Newsom has proposed a \$25 million aligned investment for services to unaccompanied youth and children. [Philanthropic supporters of the fund](#) include the James Irvine Foundation, the California Community Foundation, the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, the California Endowment and the Weingart Foundation.

Santana even believes the LAJF's model can also be replicated outside of California.

"I think immigrants live in every corner of this country and they all are entitled to a defense... Our legal system, our immigration system, is complicated. It's cumbersome. It's not accessible," said Santana. "And so from that standpoint, I think it's important that we ensure that all immigrants throughout the country have access to the rights that they are entitled to."