

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Policy Issue Resources

Publication

Although people accused of crimes in the United States are entitled to government-funded counsel for their defense, immigrants facing deportation are not. It is nearly impossible to prevail in immigration court without the assistance of counsel. Representation for everyone facing deportation is, therefore, a last line of defense to keep families and communities together. Since late 2017, an innovative public-private partnership between the County and City of Los Angeles, California Community Foundation, and Weingart Foundation has provided attorneys to people at risk of deportation through the Los Angeles Justice Fund (LAJF). Administered through local nonprofits, LAJF created and provides a critical safety net for the immigrant community, built an immigration legal services infrastructure, and shifted the culture of legal practice in the immigration courts. This report evaluates the impact of the LAJF pilot period, provides evidence that government-funded attorneys in immigration proceedings enhance due process and are critical to keeping families and communities together, and proposes recommendations for expanding and strengthening the programs impact.

Sixteen local organizations collaborated to build a robust removal defense infrastructure in Los Angeles. Between November 2017 and March 2020, LAJF provided free legal screenings for more than 1,730 area residents and direct representation for 546 people. Representation has enabled clients to remain in the United States in 62 percent of closed cases.

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