

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/my-publicly-funded-immigration-lawyer-gave-me-hope-when-i-faced-fear-and-despair>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

After the traumatic terror of being separated from her son after being detained at the border, Ana desperately wanted an attorney to help her fight deportation. She did not speak English, knew little of immigration law, and believed deportation was inevitable if she appeared in court alone. Research validates this fear. Immigrants who appear alone in court stand little chance of navigating the complex and adversarial arena of immigration law and achieving legal residency. [Represented immigrants](#) are 10 times more likely to establish a right to remain in the United States than those without counsel. Immigrants who are represented are more than three times more likely to be released from detention on bond. Yet there is no right to government-funded counsel in immigration court, and too many immigrants face deportation proceedings alone simply because they cannot afford an attorney. Ana, who fled Guatemala with her son, could not afford a lawyer when she ended up in detention and deportation proceedings. She is grateful that the Long Beach Justice Fund (LBJF), a partner of Veras [SAFE Initiative](#), provided her with an attorney who is guiding her through the asylum application process. SAFE is a group of diverse local jurisdictions working in collaboration with Vera and legal service providers to build a movement for universal representationa public defender system for immigrants like Ana. Working with LBJF's partnerthe [Immigrant Defenders Law Center](#) and [Long Beach Immigrant Rights Coalition](#) Ana became an outspoken advocate for the local successful campaign to grow LBJF. Because of the powerful advocacy of Ana and others, the City of Long Beach recently more than doubled its investment in the fund. Here is her story.

In detention, we had to sleep on concrete benches or the floor because there were so many of us. I was cold and so sad to be there. Sometimes they gave us a little mattress, but there were never enough of them. They give you aluminum to wrap yourself in, but it doesn't warm you. Sometimes, you don't sleep.

I brought my son from Guatemala so that he could have a better life here in the United States. He was being threatened by gangs where we lived. They showed up at our house with weapons looking for him. They threatened to hurt him and kill me if he would not join. My poor nephew had been killed by one of the gangs, and so we believed their threats. I was especially vulnerable as a woman and knew I could be killed by the gangs who wanted my son or by the same people who murdered my nephew and were still angry at our family. I could not let my son be hurt or be forced to join the gang, so we fled. Coming to the United States was a very hard journey that took one month. We traveled through Mexico. Sometimes we ate; sometimes we did not.

When we crossed into the United States and were in the desert, we saw the headlights of the immigration cars. They asked us what we were doing, and we said that we wanted asylum. They sent us to a detention facility, which was a terrible place.

They separated me from my son after we were detained. I was in a cell with other women like me, and my son was with young kids like him. I couldn't see him, and I was so sad and worried. It was so sad that there were so many children there, all closed in. It just fills me with sadness to remember hearing them cry.

There are still so many people who are stuck in detention and don't have lawyers. Now, with COVID-19, they really need people to support them. It is really awful to be in those places. I don't know why I was released, but I was very lucky. When I got out, someone gave me the phone number for Long Beach Justice Fund. They provided me with an attorney free of charge to help me file a claim for asylum.

In the claim, we told the judge that it is not safe for us in Guatemala because we are the target of gangs and people who have resisted gang recruitment. Guatemalan women who oppose association with gangs are in great danger.

I was happy to have the opportunity to speak at public meetings to ask the government to provide more funding for the Long Beach Justice Fund so that they can help more people like me. There are so many of us who need legal assistance. If I hadn't had a lawyer, I would have felt totally alone and without support. I would probably have given up and agreed to be deported.

My son is happy now; he is not afraid of anything. He says that it is different here. My hope is that we can win our asylum request and stay in the United States. My dream is that we can have a better life in this country.

Read the [Spanish version](#) of Ana's story.

Information about the [Immigrant Defenders Law Center](#) can be found at www.immdef.org; www.facebook.com/ImmDef/; and twitter.com/immdef. Information about [Long Beach Immigrant Rights Coalition](#) can be found at <https://www.lbirc.org/> and <https://www.facebook.com/LBIRC562/>.

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