

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/target-2020/the-tipping-point-for-universal-representation-for-immigrants>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

With attacks on the safety and dignity of immigrant communities ramping up ahead of Election Day, the threats and injustices they face have [reached a tipping point](#). Immigrants have already been confronted with the disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, detention, decades of over-prosecution and over-criminalization, and systemic racism. Now they are subject to escalated enforcement aimed directly at their communities.

In early October, ICE reported that, within a six-day span, it [arrested](#) 172 immigrants across six sanctuary cities: Baltimore, Denver, New York, Philadelphia, Seattle, and Washington, DC. These cities all have [policies](#) in place that are intended to foster trust between local law enforcement and immigrants in their jurisdictions, and yet parents, breadwinners of families, caretakers, and neighbors have been caught up in politically motivated targeting of immigrant communities.

Recent attempts to instill silence and fear in immigrant communities came in conjunction with billboards ICE [launched this month](#) in Philadelphia and other parts of Pennsylvania depicting people of color as wanted undocumented immigrants and calling sanctuary city policies a real danger.

Escalating fearmongering, ICE collaboration with local police agencies, and unfettered enforcement means more immigrants will be forced to navigate a complex legal system alone in the months ahead.

Especially in this moment when efforts to strip immigrants of basic protections continue in full force, release from detention is nearly impossible without legal representation. The radiating impacts of criminalization, mass detention, separation, and deportation of immigrant community members and their families will outlast any federal administration unless we see bolder and more innovative local and state action that is responsive to community needs.

Representation alone is not enough to undo the decades of systemic injustices facing immigrants in the United States, but publicly funded deportation defense serves as a necessary check on an unjust system while filling the gap of leadership and action at the federal level.

Vera's [SAFE Initiative](#) was launched in 2017 to counter the rising tide of government sanctioned inequities and injustices confronting immigrants in the United States. In cities like Denver, deportation defense programs were part of broader local efforts to stand up for immigrant rights, including the sanctuary measures under federal attack. Then, as now, local and state actors demonstrated bold leadership. With communities most immediately and intimately feeling the insecurity and instability of immigration detention and deportation and the spread of COVID-19, leaders and activists across the country continue to successfully demand local public investment in deportation defense programs, including the 21 partner sites of SAFE.

Just in the last few months in the midst of COVID-related budget challenges jurisdictions have continued, expanded, and started new deportation defense programs as a result of successful campaign efforts and as cornerstones of cities longstanding policies to protect immigrant communities. For example, Prince Georges County, Maryland, [approved](#) additional FY21 funding for deportation defense, becoming one of a few jurisdictions around the country to ensure that every resident detained and facing deportation is now guaranteed legal representation. Long Beach, California, also established a baseline and increased funding for the Long Beach Justice Fund.

These efforts mobilize broad coalitions across justice movements and center the voices of those most directly impacted to keep families together and advance due process for all. At this pivotal time for the future of immigrant justice and our democracy, local and state efforts for publicly funded deportation defense programs are shaping the course of a national movement for universal representation, a public defender system for people in immigration court.

As additional deportation defense campaign efforts focused on both budget and legislative strategies gain steam for the next fiscal year, we can harness the innovation, strategies, and power of local activism to continue to grow state, local, and federal representation programs and ultimately advocate for federally funded universal representation for all. As SAFE approaches its fourth year, and against the backdrop of escalating enforcement and politically motivated targeting, bold local and state leadership should provide the roadmap for federal action for immigrant communities, public investment, and a new vision of justice.

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