

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/announcing-new-grants-for-community-groups-working-toward-universal-representation-for-immigrants>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Amid increased threats to immigrant communities, community-based organizing and advocacy continues to fuel critically needed progressive state and local policies that foster safe and inclusive communities, center the voices of immigrant communities, and build pressure for systemic change and reform at the federal level. These include universal representation pilot programs, which further the goal that every immigrant facing deportation should have the right to a publicly funded lawyer if they cannot afford one.

Vera's Safety and Fairness for Everyone (SAFE) Network last week announced an inaugural [request for proposals](#) for community-based organizations in SAFE jurisdictions to further elevate and increase capacity for such grassroots organizing and advocacy for universal representation programs.

Immigrants remain under unprecedented attacks by our federal government. Threats of arrests and detention of immigrants have soared, families have been systematically separated, and immigration enforcement policies continue to make immigrants more vulnerable to deportation while undermining avenues to fight deportation. Immigrant detention continues to reach record levels, with approximately [half a million people nationally detained in FY19](#) up 58 percent from FY17. And in detention, people face inhumane conditions, loss of liberty, lasting trauma that radiates to families and communities, and significant barriers to accessing counsel and a fair day in court.

Despite the high stakes, immigrants facing deportation do not have the right to a public defender if they can't afford a lawyer. Most people facing deportation proceedings in immigration court [including 70 percent of people in detention](#) are fighting for their lives and their families without a lawyer. Nationwide, fewer than 5 percent of unrepresented immigrants in removal proceedings receive favorable outcomes.

In response, the [SAFE Network](#) in which Vera partners with local governments, legal service providers, and advocates to pilot universal representation programs for detained community members has now in its third year successfully launched 18 such programs in 11 states. In total, more than 35 communities in 18 states across the country have funded deportation defense programs. And states such as California, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Oregon have now allocated state funding for deportation defense.

In the face of demonizing and divisive narratives about immigrants, publicly funded counsel programs are an effective and common-sense approach to protecting immigrant communities from detention and deportation and to standing up to harsh federal enforcement. Such programs bring communities together around shared values of dignity and fundamental fairness and shift the public narrative around immigrants, due process, and detention. And by ensuring that all immigrants have equal access to representation, universal representation programs are advancing racial equity and efforts to dismantle the pipeline between the U.S. criminal justice and immigration systems.

As public funding for removal defense is gaining heightened interest in diverse cities, counties, and states across the country, locally rooted organizing and advocacy are driving a rapidly growing national movement for universal representation. Most [recently](#), community groups organized to move forward a removal defense fund in Harris County, Texas. And new state legislative sessions have catalyzed coalitions on the ground working toward a new statewide deportation defense fund in Colorado, increased funding of deportation defense in New York and New Jersey, and new statewide right to counsel legislation in New York that would guarantee publicly funded counsel for every person in immigration court proceedings who cannot afford a lawyer.

SAFE's new community grant program will help sustain and elevate this growing momentum by building capacity for a powerful network of grassroots organizing for universal representation led and informed by communities directly impacted by harsh immigration policies. And as more campaigns gain momentum across the country, a growing model of collaboration embodied by the SAFE Network among local governments, legal service providers, and advocates and organizers across immigration and racial justice movements sets a powerful course toward federal systemic change.

Read more about the SAFE Community Grant program and eligibility here: <https://storage.googleapis.com/vera-web-assets/inline-downloads/safe-community-grants-rfp-english.pdf>

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