

## **Free legal help for Mexicans expands**

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### **Body**

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In a first of its kind alliance, the Santa Clara County chapter of an immigration lawyer's organization is teaming up with the Mexican Consulate in San Jose to provide **free legal** consultation to Mexican immigrants from four Bay Area counties.

The goal, organizers said, is to steer vulnerable immigrants away from unscrupulous "notarios" or people posing as immigration **legal** experts, and get them proper **legal help**.

Officials of the American Immigration Lawyers Association and Consul General Bruno Figueroa said the pilot project, scheduled to begin late in May, is the first in the country. If successful, organizers are hoping the model will be duplicated in other communities in the country.

"Without a doubt, it's a program that addresses a great need," Figueroa said.

Spanish-speaking volunteer lawyers will give **free** short consultations twice a month to immigrants at the consulate on North First Street. After screening, they will be referred to AILA lawyers or non-profit **legal** service organizations.

Each month, about 350 **Mexicans** seek **legal help** from the consulate for a range of problems regarding deaths, divorces, child custody and insurance. But many of them are seeking answers to immigration problems.

The consulate serves four counties - Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, San Benito and Monterey - where 500,000 to 700,000 Mexican nationals live.

A **legal** staff of four people field the queries each month and refer most of them to an informal network of lawyers in the area and non-profit groups that provide **legal help** to immigrants.

But the need in the community has always exceeded the consulate's capacity, Figueroa said, before signing the formal agreement Thursday afternoon with AILA's county chair, Alisa Thomas, during a news conference and orientation at the consulate.

"The value of this service is to allow individuals who do have a chance to straighten their **legal** status," said Daniel Shanfield, incoming chapter chair of AILA and the one who proposed the project. "By getting people on the right track, we can keep them from the pitfalls."

"A program like this can **help** keep mixed-status families together in the United States," Shanfield said.

After Thursday's news conference, Shanfield conducted orientation for the dozen volunteer lawyers who signed up for the program.

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"It's a great idea," said Adel Olvera, director of the Immigration and Citizenship program at the Center for Employment Training in San Jose. "We're thankful there's this additional support now."

Like the consulate, groups like CET scramble to find **free** or low-cost **legal** advice for the immigrants seeking **help** with immigration applications.

"It will really **help** people get some good direction to begin their inquiry at least," said Karen Seiden, a private immigration attorney in Sunnyvale and an AILA member who is participating in the project. Seiden is also staff attorney at CET.

In the past, groups like CET would send a **legal** representative to the consulate in San Francisco to do consultations, she said.

"Formalizing this is a good thing," Seiden said. "You'll get a flow of attorneys and referrals to appropriate agencies."

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