
SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Senator Sabrina Cervantes, Chair
2025 - 2026 Regular Session

SB 1194 (Caballero) - Immigration Legal Fellowship Project

Version: March 24, 2026
Urgency: No
Hearing Date: May 4, 2026

Policy Vote: JUD. 11 - 1, HUMAN S. 3 - 1
Mandate: No
Consultant: Agnes Lee

Bill Summary: SB 1194 would establish the Immigration Legal Fellowship Project.

Fiscal Impact: Unknown General Fund cost pressures, potentially ranging from \$7 million to \$8 million to fund each cohort, based on the experience of the existing immigration fellowship program administered by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS).

Background: The Budget Act of 2019 appropriated funding and authorized the CDSS to create the first state-funded immigration legal fellowship. The fellowship program aims to increase the number of removal defense attorneys and the capacity of nonprofit organizations to provide removal defense services in California's Central Coast and Central Valley. The program received \$4.7 million General Fund in 2019-20 to support the first two years of the first fellowship cohort. The project received \$10 million General Fund in 2022-23 to support a third year of the first fellowship cohort and to establish a second fellowship cohort.

According to CDSS, these fellowships provide intensive removal defense training and mentoring, as well as practical experience serving rural communities. During the first two years, the legal fellowship focuses on training, including immigration-specific legal knowledge, court practices, legal writing, and various other complex topics. The fellows co-counsel cases alongside their assigned mentor attorneys and begin representing clients directly. During the third year, fellows are integrated within the host organization focusing on individual caseloads with access to removal defense resources and sustaining the implemented services in the communities.

Proposed Law: Specific provisions of the bill would:

- Establish the Immigration Legal Fellowship Project within the CDSS; and require CDSS to administer the project to support legal fellowships for qualified individuals who provide immigration legal services, including, but not limited to, representation in removal proceedings, affirmative immigration relief, and related legal services, as specified.
- Require CDSS to award grants or enter into contracts with nonprofit entities to operate legal fellowships, as specified.
- Make implementation contingent upon an appropriation by the Legislature.

- Require CDSS to include information on the use of funds appropriated for these purposes in reports or updates provided to the Legislature regarding the department's immigration programs, as specified.

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