

Date of Hearing: June 23, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY
Ash Kalra, Chair
SB 1194 (Caballero) – As Amended March 24, 2026

SENATE VOTE: 30-9

SUBJECT: IMMIGRATION LEGAL FELLOWSHIP PROJECT

SYNOPSIS

In 2019, the Legislature granted the California Department of Social Services \$4.7 million dollars to establish the Immigration Legal Fellowship Project (ILFP). The mission of the ILFP was to grow the availability of effective immigration legal services, including removal defense services, in California's rural communities which historically suffer from a lack of access to legal services. The one-time budget grant provided funding for ten fellows to complete a three-year program, during which they learned from highly-trained immigration attorneys and built connections with other community-based service providers. This bill would codify the program under the Department of Social Services, including providing guidelines on which nonprofits may qualify for grant funding, upon appropriation by the Legislature, consistent with guidelines in existing law.

This bill is sponsored by Immigrant Defense Advocates and the Office of Attorney General Rob Bonta. It enjoys widespread support among immigration legal service providers, nonprofit providers, civil rights advocates, and immigrant rights advocates. There is no known opposition. This bill was previously approved by the Committee on Human Services 6-1.

SUMMARY: Codifies the Immigrant Legal Fellowship Project within the State Department of Social Services. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Establishes the Immigration Legal Fellowship Project within the State Department of Social Services (CDSS or department) for the purpose of expanding access to high-quality immigration legal services, including, but not limited to, removal defense, in rural and underserved regions of California.
- 2) Requires the department to administer the project to support legal fellowships for qualified individuals who provide immigration legal services pursuant to existing law, including, but not limited to, representation in removal proceedings, affirmative immigration relief, and related legal services provided pursuant to this chapter.
- 3) Requires the department to award grants or enter into contracts with nonprofit entities to operate legal fellowships, which shall include, at a minimum, all of the following components:
 - a) Recruitment, placement, coordination, and hosting of legal fellows;
 - b) Training, mentorship, and supervision of legal fellows;
 - c) Technical assistance and programmatic support necessary to ensure the effective delivery of legal services by legal fellows.

- 4) Authorizes the department to establish eligibility criteria, application requirements, and funding priorities for purposes of administering this project, including, but not limited to, criteria specific to serving rural and underserved communities.
- 5) Requires the department to include information on the use of funds appropriated for the purposes of this section in reports or updates provided to the Legislature regarding the department's immigration programs, including, at a minimum:
 - a) The number of fellowships funded;
 - b) The geographic regions served;
 - c) The types of legal services provided and in what language or languages;
 - d) The timeline of implementation and administration of this section;
 - e) The identification of further barriers and challenges to the delivery and provision of legal services.
- 6) Prohibits the provisions from being construed to limit the authority of the department to administer other immigration-related programs authorized under the chapter.
- 7) Makes implementation contingent upon an appropriation by the Legislature for these purposes.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Directs the Department of Social Services, subject to the availability of funding from the annual Budget Act, to contract with qualified nonprofit legal services organizations to provide legal services to unaccompanied undocumented minors who are transferred to the care and custody of the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement and who are present in this state, for the sole purpose of providing legal representation to unaccompanied undocumented minors who are in the physical custody of the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement or who are residing with a family member or other sponsor. (Welfare and Institutions Code Section 13300 (a) – (b).)
- 2) Defines “legal services” to include culturally and linguistically appropriate services provided by attorneys, paralegals, interpreters and other support staff for state court proceedings, federal immigration proceedings, and any appeals arising from those proceedings. (Welfare and Institutions Code Section 13300 (d).)
- 3) Requires that contracts awarded pursuant to this section be executed only with nonprofit legal services organizations that meet all of the following requirements:
 - a) Have at least three years of experience handling asylum, T-Visa, U-Visa, or special immigrant juvenile status case and have represented at least 25 individuals in these matters;
 - b) Have experience in representing individuals in removal proceedings and asylum applications;

- c) Have conducted trainings on these issues for practitioners beyond their staff;
 - d) Have experience guiding and supervising the work of attorneys whom themselves do not regularly participate in this area of the law but nevertheless work pro bono on the specified types of cases;
 - e) Are accredited by the Board of Immigration Appeals under the United States Department of Justice's Executive Office for Immigration Review or meet the requirements to receive funding from the Trust Fund Program administered by the State Bar of California. (Welfare and Institutions Code Section 13301 (a).)
- 4) Requires the state to provide legal counsel to every immigrant youth in the State of California, subject to the availability of state funding. (Welfare and Institutions Code Section 13300.5 (a).)

FISCAL EFFECT: As currently in print this bill is keyed fiscal.

COMMENTS: California is home to over 10 million immigrants from all over the world, accounting for nearly a quarter of the United States' total immigrant population. (*U.S. Immigrant Population by State and County*, Migration Policy Institute available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-immigrant-population-state-and-county>.) These numbers include naturalized citizens, legal permanent residents (green card holders), various types of legal nonimmigrants (such as students on work visas), refugees and asylum seekers, and undocumented immigrants.

Demand for immigration-related services is chronically high, and each individual type of matter often requires highly specialized knowledge from experienced immigration attorneys. Cases pending before immigration court in California have increased from 78,718 in 2012 to over 355,706 in 2026, for a total increase of more than 350% in just over one decade. (*Immigration Court Backlog*, TRAC Immigration available at: <https://trac.syr.edu/phptools/immigration/backlog/>.) Despite having similarly austere consequences as criminal proceedings, including potential deportation and removal, parties before immigration court are not entitled to government-appointed counsel in the event they cannot afford legal representation. Last year, the Legislature enacted AB 1261 (Bonta) Chap. 665, Stats. 2025 which established a statutory guarantee that all undocumented unaccompanied minors would receive a state-provided attorney, pending the availability of funding. However, as the state faces budget difficulties making the dedication of the necessary funding increasingly trying, demand remains high. The pressure to provide effective legal services then shifts to nonprofit legal services organizations. Fortunately for many Californians, the state has no shortage of nonprofit legal services organizations willing to engage in the intellectually and emotionally challenging work of immigration representation. By and large, however, these nonprofits are based out of more populated urban areas of the state, while rural communities struggle to access legal services.

The Immigration Legal Fellowship Program. As part of the Legislature's efforts to bolster availability of immigration services in these high-need rural areas, the Budget Act of 2019 included \$4.7 million to fund the Immigration Legal Fellowship Program (ILFP) under the Department of Social Services (Department or CDSS). As described by the Department, "[t]he Immigration Legal Fellowship Project (ILFP) 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.” (*Other Programs and Projects*, California Department of Social Services available at: <https://cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/immigration/other-projects>.) The ILFP provided fellowship placement and funding for three years, between 2020 – 2023. As detailed in the Department’s Final Service Delivery Report, issued in May 2024, all ten fellows selected completed their three-year program with host organizations in underserved communities. The fellows received intensive training on the intricacies of immigration law and procedure under highly experienced immigration attorneys, and the host organizations were supported with development training leading to long-term sustainable removal defense programs. At the conclusion of the three years, all but one fellow remained in the areas targeted by the program. Eight fellows were hired by their host nonprofit, nine passed the Bar exam, and one applied for full accreditation from the Department of Justice. During their time in the program, the fellows managed removal defense cases, conducted intakes and consultations, established partnerships with other community service providers, and led monthly in-office triage clinics resulting in consultations for community members in removal proceedings.

Considering the ILFP only received a one-time grant, these statistics reflect significant and lasting positive impacts by not only increasing the availability of immediately-available immigration legal resources in areas of the state with high-demand, but also bolstering the roster of well-trained immigration attorneys.

According to the author:

Many of the communities most affected by immigrant enforcement, especially in rural and underserved regions of California, have too few trained and too little removal defense capacity to meet the need, particularly when the lack can result in family separation, detention, and deportation. SB 1194 builds on a model California has already tested successfully. The five-year pilot of the Immigration Legal Fellowship Project demonstrated that a state-supported fellowship can expand access to immigration legal services by recruiting and training early career attorneys, placing them with trusted legal service organizations, and building long-term legal infrastructure in communities that have historically been left behind. Over the last five years, the pilot program supported 19 fellows, 13 nonprofit organizations, expanded services across 39 counties, and provided more than 2,500 legal services all while strengthening local legal capacity and workforce development in these communities.

Just as important, the pilot did more than help individual clients—it strengthened organizations and created a durable workforce pipeline. Host organizations increased their capacity, some became newly eligible for removal defense funding, and many fellows remained in public service roles. This bill is not only about immediate representation; it is also about building a sustainable statewide system of due process support where it is needed the most

This bill would codify the Immigration Legal Fellowship Program, including guidelines on which nonprofits would be eligible to receive grant funding consistent with the existing framework under the One California program.

The Legislature has taken innumerable steps to protect California’s vulnerable population in the wake of both Trump Administrations, many of which have, understandably, tested the boundaries of constitutionality. In the midst of all of these efforts, nonprofits and community-based organizations throughout the state have engaged in the grueling work of engaging with

those same immigrant communities on the ground, responding quickly to distress calls, and selflessly working countless hours to defend those in greatest need. It is undeniable that one of the most effective tools in the State’s arsenal is propping up those organizations that have built networks and trust among the state’s immigrant communities, and permanently codifying the ILFP seems a commonsense way to continue to do so.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT: This bill is sponsored by Immigrant Defense Advocates and the California Department of Justice Office of Attorney General Rob Bonta. It enjoys widespread support among immigration legal service providers, nonprofit providers, civil rights advocates, and immigrant rights advocates. In support of their measure, Immigrant Defense Advocates submits:

Immigration court proceedings carry life-altering consequences—family separation, loss of livelihood, and forced return to danger—yet immigrants in removal proceedings are not guaranteed an attorney. This creates a severe access-to-justice gap, particularly in rural regions of California where there are fewer nonprofit legal service providers and fewer attorneys trained to handle complex deportation defense.

California has taken important steps to invest in immigration legal services. But even with dedicated state funding, a persistent obstacle remains: capacity. Many of the regions with the highest need—such as parts of the Central Valley, Central Coast, and Inland Empire—have historically had too few organizations with the staffing, training structures, and program infrastructure necessary to provide representation at scale. In other words, funding alone cannot solve the problem if communities lack organizations equipped to deliver the services.

ILFP was designed to solve this structural problem by building sustainable legal capacity where it is most needed. The Fellowship pairs early-career attorneys with experienced mentor organizations for intensive training and ongoing technical assistance, while placing Fellows with host organizations serving rural and underserved communities. This model strengthens both the attorney pipeline and the organizational infrastructure needed for long-term community-based representation.

The Fellowship approach also creates statewide benefits: strengthening rural legal capacity reduces pressure on already-overextended providers in larger metro areas, builds regional partnerships, and establishes a continuum of services between organizations near immigration courts, those near detention facilities, and those located farther away but serving communities affected by aggressive immigration enforcement. The first large-scale raid against California’s immigrant community in 2025, “Operation Return to Sender”, took place in the Central Valley, where the 3-day operation terrorized the community leading to 78 arrests. Workforce attendance in orchards plummeted immediately. Some farms reported that 75% of their workers stayed home out of fear. A Stanford University study later found that these raids led to over 81,000 lost school days in the region as parents kept children home for safety.

Placing the Fellowship into statute is essential to ensure stable, predictable support for underserved communities and to preserve the institutional structure that makes this model effective. Codification will also help California remain prepared to respond to shifting federal policies and any future immigration reform—by ensuring that trained attorneys and capable host organizations exist across the state, not only in major urban centers.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**Support**

Immigrant Defense Advocates (co-sponsor)
California Department of Justice (co-sponsor)
ACLU California Action
Asian Americans Advancing Justice - California
Asian Americans Advancing Justice Southern California
California Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
California Change Lawyers
California Collaborative for Immigrant Justice
California Immigrant Policy Center
California Immigration Project
Center for Gender & Refugee Studies–California
Central Valley Immigrant Integration Collaborative
Centro Binacional Para El Desarrollo Indigena Oaxaqueño (CBDIO)
Centro LA Familia Advocacy Services
Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA)
Community Action Board
Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County
Education and Leadership Foundation
Immigrant Legal Defense
Immigrant Legal Resource Center
Imperial Valley Equity & Justice Coalition
Jewish Family Service of San Diego
Monterey County Supervisor
Moreno Institute
Oasis Legal Services
San Bernardino Community Service Center, Inc.
Santa Barbara County Immigrant Legal Defense Center
Santa Clara County Office of Education
Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors
Santa Cruz County Superintendent of Schools
Thai Community Development Center
The Immigrant Legal Resource Center
Vera Institute of Justice
Watsonville Law Center
Wendy Root Askew, Supervisor, Monterey County

Opposition

None on file

Analysis Prepared by: Manuela Boucher-de la Cadena / JUD. / (916) 319-2334