

Date of Hearing: August 5, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

SB 1194 (Caballero) – As Amended March 24, 2026

Policy Committee:	Human Services	Vote:	6 - 1
	Judiciary		9 - 3

Urgency: No State Mandated Local Program: No Reimbursable: No

SUMMARY:

This bill places in statute the Immigration Legal Fellowship Project established in the Budget Act of 2019 and administered by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS).

Specifically, this bill:

- 1) Upon appropriation by the Legislature, establishes in statute the Immigration Legal Fellowship Project within CDSS to expand access to high-quality immigration legal services in rural and underserved regions of California.
- 2) Requires CDSS 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 bill.
- 3) Requires CDSS to award grants or enter into contracts with nonprofit entities to operate legal fellowships, which must include, at a minimum, recruitment, placement, coordination, hosting, training, mentorship, and supervision of legal fellows; and provide technical assistance and programmatic support necessary to ensure the effective delivery of legal services.
- 4) Authorizes CDSS 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 CDSS to include information on the use of funds appropriated for this program in reports or updates to the Legislature regarding CDSS's immigration programs, including, at a minimum and among other information, the number of fellowships funded, the geographic regions served, and the types of legal services provided.

FISCAL EFFECT:

CDSS estimates, based on current project operations, ongoing General Fund costs of approximately \$4 million for each two-year service term of eight fellows.

The Immigration Legal Fellowship Project received a \$7.5 million General Fund allocation in the 2026 budget act to support an additional fellowship cohort through June 30, 2029.

COMMENTS:1) **Purpose.** 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. [This bill] 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.

This bill is sponsored by Immigrant Defense Advocates and the Office of Attorney General Rob Bonta and has extensive support from immigration legal service providers, nonprofit providers, civil rights advocates, and immigrant rights groups. The bill has no registered opposition.

2) **Background.** In 2019, the Legislature granted CDSS \$4.7 million dollars to establish the Immigration Legal Fellowship Project. The project aims to increase the number of removal defense attorneys and the capacity of nonprofit organizations to provide removal defense services in rural and underserved communities. During the first two years, the 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.

The 2019 \$4.7 million budget allocation supported the first two years of the project, which received an additional \$10 million General Fund in fiscal year 2022-23 to support the third year of the first fellowship cohort and to establish a second cohort. The Budget Act of 2026 provides a \$7.5 million allocation, available until June 30, 2029, to continue the project. This bill places the fellowship project into statute, establishing it as an ongoing program.

3) **Related Legislation.** AB 1261 (Bonta), Chapter 665, Statutes of 2025, required the state to provide legal representation for unaccompanied undocumented minors in federal immigration proceedings, or related state proceedings, in California.

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