

SUMMER 2026

ESPERANZA IMMIGRANT RIGHTS PROJECT

NEWSLETTER



Dear Esperanza Community,

Spring is often a season of renewal—a time when we look forward to new beginnings. But in the immigration world, this past year has offered anything but. Instead of budding opportunities, we have witnessed the continued erosion of access, justice, and safety for the communities we serve.

It has now been just over a year since the **federal government terminated critical legal access programs**—the Immigration Court Helpdesk, the Legal Orientation Programs for people in detention, for custodians of unaccompanied minors, and our call center for custodians for unaccompanied minors —programs that ensured people in deportation proceedings had even a fighting chance at understanding their rights. It has been almost a year since the sweeping raids across our city: arrests on the streets, in workplaces, and even in courthouses. The community's need for protection, guidance, and representation has only grown more urgent.

Enforcement efforts continue to fuel fear, separation, and instability. Simultaneously, the support systems meant to safeguard due process are being weakened—from staff cuts affecting DOJ accreditation, to reduced funding for shelters for unaccompanied children, to constraints on appeals and work permit eligibility. The list goes on... The system is increasingly designed to push people into the shadows and out of the country. And yet—we remain steadfast. Esperanza shows up every day.

Our representation team continues to **secure SIJ approvals, win bond for NQRP clients, and succeed in habeas litigation**. Our community education efforts are meeting urgent needs through **consultations, motions, and awareness of scammers** seeking to prey on the unsuspecting. Our pro bono partners are helping immigrants **file work permits and asylum applications through clinics** that move mountains one case at a time. Our holistic support team ensures clients



Kimberley Plotnik
Esperanza Program Director

have **access to health care, housing, and education** offering critical a safety need. And our dedicated volunteers graciously and selflessly helping to **fill all the gaps to expand our reach and impact**.

The system may be stacked against us right now—but we do not have the luxury of giving up. Every day that we persist we bring relief, and we offer dignity.

At Esperanza we remain fiercely committed to providing legal services and supporting those who need it most. Together, we can protect due process, defend families, and stand up for the dignity and justice that every person deserves.

In Solidarity,

Program Director
Esperanza Immigrant Rights Project,
a program of Catholic Charities of Los Angeles, Inc.



Mobile Immigration Services Program



During the months of March and April, Esperanza held three EAD Clinics, partnering with law firms including Mayor Brown, Sheppard, and Willkie Farr & Gallagher. These firms and their attorneys worked pro bono to provide pro se assistance in completing Employment Authorization Document (EAD) applications for participants under the guidance of Esperanza attorneys. Notably, the law firms also covered application fees for these participants who could not otherwise afford them. These participants face housing insecurity and financial instability. By helping them obtain work authorization, the EAD Clinics offer a pathway to greater economic security and independence.

Through these partnerships, Esperanza was able to prepare twenty-two pro se applications. With ongoing changes to immigration policies and rising application fees, it has become increasingly difficult for many immigrants to obtain this important benefit. Pro bono attorneys not only earn MCLE credit and fulfill pro bono service commitments but also make a meaningful and lasting impact on the individuals and families they serve.

Meet Our Staff Attorney/ Immigrant Justice Corps Fellow

Naydin Zepeda was born in Los Angeles and raised in Boyle Heights. While growing up in Boyle Heights, Naydin was heavily involved in her community, particularly through Parks and Recreation. Naydin shares that as a kid, she thought her career was headed towards becoming a history teacher not a lawyer. However, she eventually found herself in law school and her interest in immigration law solidified the summer after her first year. During this time, she was doing a summer internship with a private immigration law firm that focused on LGBTQ asylum cases and family-based petitions. The experience made her realize how privileged she was, specifically to have been born in the United States. She recalls thinking of the stark contrasts between the client she was assisting from El Salvador who was about the same age as her. While, Naydin was able to pursue her education, the client had his dreams and aspirations taken from him.

Naydin was drawn to Esperanza due to her prior experience as a paralegal at LAFLA. She really enjoyed working in the non-profit sector and providing services to people, so she continued to seek this type of work in similar settings. She shares that there seems to always be a desperate need and working at Esperanza impacts this need first-hand, which is something she really likes. Currently, Naydin primarily does removal defense cases, some affirmative, and affirmative asylum cases at Esperanza. For Naydin, her hope is that non-profit organizations, and the immigration law field as a whole, continue to evolve/develop with a universal representation model.



MEET OUR SUMMER INTERNS



Zach

Name: Zach Manzanares
School: Drake University Law School
Year: Rising 2L

"I am looking forward to learning about how to help the immigrant population of Los Angeles. I hope to be able to provide guidance to those in removal proceedings."



Jason

Name: Jason Ferrel
School: Stanford University
Year: Undergraduate Sophomore

"Looking forward to learning more about Esperanza's interactions and collaborations with the Los Angeles community and hopefully contributing to the relationship!"



Vanessa

Name: Vanessa Hurtado
School: Marquette University Law School
Year: Rising 2L

"This summer I am looking forward to learning more about the immigration process and I hope to make a positive impact in people's lives through my work during the next 10 weeks at Esperanza."



Manuel

Name: Manuel Delgado
School: Western State College of Law
Year: Rising 2L

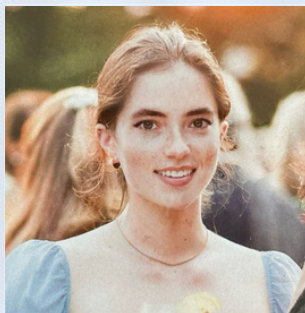
"This summer I'm most looking forward to work on my ability to communicate with the client, both the ability to speak and the ability to listen, which I believe is of utmost importance to advocating their interests. I am thankful for the opportunity to work at EIRP and look forward to a great summer."



Emily

Name: Emily McGhee
School: Samford University Cumberland School of Law
Year: Rising 2L

"I am excited by the opportunity to experience what it is like to do this vital work in the nonprofit sector. I also look forward to continuing to learn from the amazing EIRP attorneys and expanding my knowledge of best practices for immigration attorneys practicing in California."



Georgia

Name: Georgia Ehrhardt-Fish
School: UCLA Law School
Year: Rising 2L

"I am most excited to learn more about the NQRP program and how to be a better advocate for people in detention. I'm also looking forward to getting hands-on experience with CAT cases and writing asylum declarations!"



Lizeth

Name: Lizeth Rocha
School: Duke University
Year: Undergraduate Senior

"This summer, I look forward to witnessing the many ways in which team members at Esperanza face the ever-changing immigration laws. Through this, I hope to learn how to eventually become a resilient and creative immigration attorney."



Lily

Name: Lily Contreras
School: Western State College of Law
Year: 3L

"I am set to graduate this December, so what I am looking forward to the most about my time at Esperanza is being able to learn from everyone what has helped them stay in Immigration Law for so long."

More Than a Case Number: The Power of Holistic Advocacy for Unaccompanied Children *by Lidia Flores Bush EIRP Case Manager*

ESPERANZA serves as one of the largest providers for the Children Holistic Immigration Project (CHIRP), a pilot program funded by the California Department of Social Services. This model shifts the paradigm from isolated legal defense to integrated advocacy. In the CHIRP framework, Case Managers (CM) and attorneys operate as a unified team. By acknowledging that a client's mental health and social environment directly impact their legal outcomes, the program ensures that every advocacy plan is as sensitive to a child's humanity as it is to the law.

Emmanuel's legal journey spanned eight years—one-third of his life. During the final two years under the CHIRP program, he reached a critical juncture in his immigration process, yet he remained stuck. Despite repeated legal explanations, Emmanuel appeared disengaged, providing short answers and avoiding eye contact. He frequently asked about his permanent residency card "green card" but seemed unable to grasp the remaining steps required to secure it.

The team recognized that traditional communication was failing. Pivoting their strategy, the CM and attorney invited him to the office for a series of visual-based meetings. By using drawings and "puzzle pieces" to map out his case, the team finally broke through the communication barrier. For the first time, Emmanuel engaged with the process without repetitive questioning, curious instead about why the team had changed their approach. This shift signaled the beginning of a deeper trust.

Holistic support requires meeting the client where they are, even when progress is inconsistent. When Emmanuel expressed interest in finishing high school—having previously dropped out due to bullying—the CM provided various referrals, adapting to his request for virtual options. When he struggled to follow through, the team didn't view it as a failure of character, but as an opportunity for curiosity. They slowed the rhythm, breaking down complex tasks into "small pieces" to prevent him from feeling overwhelmed. Whether it was correcting his name at the Social Security Administration office or attending a medical exam, the CM provided step-by-step action plans. This patient, incremental approach signaled to Emmanuel that he was not alone; his team was by his side through his "bad days" and inconsistencies.

Over time, Emmanuel's engagement shifted from passive to proactive. A year into this holistic approach, his demeanor had completely changed. During his biometrics appointment, he was talkative and optimistic, sharing about saving money to buy land in his country of origin—a home to return to as a future Permanent Resident.

By July 2025, the collaborative efforts of the CM and attorney bore fruit: Emmanuel's application for permanent residency was approved.

When Emmanuel came to pick up his permanent residency card, we asked about what made the program special, to which he said: "You never gave up on me." To Emmanuel, the value of the CHIRP program was the experience that despite his communication barriers and personal struggles, he was seen and understood. His story proves that in the journey of immigration, the most effective legal advocacy is that which treats the client not just as a case to be won, but as a person to be supported.



UPCOMING



Non-Legal Volunteer Info Session

Esperanza Immigrant Rights Project is looking for
translators/interpreters!

WHEN:

TIME: 12 PM

WEDNESDAY JULY
29TH

WHERE:
VIA ZOOM

REGISTRATION:

[HTTPS://US06WEB.ZOOM.US/MEETI
NG/REGISTER/_A1COW-
DSF2IJCWIHBDYZA](https://us06web.zoom.us/j/84451234567)



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