

Date of Hearing: June 16, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Alex Lee, Chair

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

**SENATE VOTE:** 30-9

**SUBJECT:** Immigration Legal Fellowship Project

**SUMMARY:** Establishes the Immigration Legal Fellowship Project (ILFP) as a permanent program. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Establishes the ILFP within the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) 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) Provides that CDSS shall administer the ILFP to support legal fellowships for qualified individuals, as defined, who provide immigration legal services, including, but not limited to, representation in removal proceedings, affirmative immigration relief, and related legal services.
- 3) Provides that CDSS shall 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; and,
  - c) Technical assistance and programmatic support necessary to ensure the effective delivery of legal services by legal fellows.
- 4) Provides that for purposes of administering the ILFP, CDSS may establish eligibility criteria, application requirements, and funding priorities, including, but not limited to, criteria specific to serving rural and underserved communities.
- 5) Specifies that CDSS shall include information on the use of funds appropriated for the ILFP in reports or updates provided to the Legislature regarding CDSS immigration programs, including identification of further barriers and challenges to the delivery and provision of legal services.
- 6) Provides that the law regarding the ILFP shall not be construed to limit the authority of CDSS to administer other immigration-related programs authorized to be provided as services for undocumented persons.
- 7) Specifies that implementation of the ILFP is contingent upon an appropriation by the Legislature.

- 8) Defines “nonprofit entity” as an entity that meets specified requirements in existing law that require an organization must be a federally tax-exempt charity or labor union, hold California state tax-exempt status, and possess at least three years of documented experience in specialized immigration removal defense to qualify for state-funded legal services.
- 9) Defines “qualified individual” as a licensed attorney or a recent law school graduate.

**EXISTING LAW:**

- 1) Requires CDSS to provide grants, subject to the availability of funding from the annual Budget Act, for the purpose of providing one or more of the following services:
  - a) Services to persons residing in, or formerly residing in, California, including, but not limited to, any of the following:
    - i) Services to assist with the application process for initial or renewal requests of deferred action under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy with the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services;
    - ii) Services to obtain other immigration remedies and benefits; or,
    - iii) Services to assist with the naturalization process and an appeal arising from the process.
  - b) Services to provide legal training and technical assistance;
  - c) Prohibits funds available for grants from being used to provide legal services to an individual who has been convicted of, or who is currently appealing a conviction for, a violent felony, or a serious felony, as defined. (Welfare and Institutions Code [WIC] § 133003)
- 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. (WIC § 13300 (d))

**FISCAL EFFECT:** According to the Senate Committee on Appropriations on the March 24, 2026, version of the bill, “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).”

**COMMENTS:**

**Background:** *Immigration Legal Fellowship Project.* The Budget Act of 2019 appropriated \$4.7 million and authorized CDSS to create the first state-funded immigration legal fellowship. The fellowship formally launched in 2021 as a two-year pilot program to train and mentor an initial cohort of 10 legal fellows. As the program progressed, the fellowship structure was extended to feature three-year capacity-building programs to provide stability for the fellows and the host organizations they serve.

The ILFP was established 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. ILFP provides legal fellows the opportunity to be trained and mentored by the premier immigrant rights organizations in the state, while being housed in rural communities with the highest unmet need for services. The program was designed to provide recent law school graduates with the opportunity to be hosted in organizations located in rural regions, while still enjoying the benefits of being trained by established removal defense organizations.

The ILFP is designed to expand access to counsel in rural regions of the state to support vulnerable populations such as agricultural workers and to increase the number of qualified immigration attorneys to assist California residents in need of immigration-related legal services.

A Final Service Delivery Report issued in May 2024 by CDSS found that the program successfully increased access to legal representation for immigrants facing deportation, strengthened the capacity of participating nonprofits, and helped establish sustainable removal defense programs in rural regions. Fellows provided a wide range of legal services, including consultations, court representation, bond hearings, appeals, and services for unaccompanied minors. Key outcomes included:

- All ten fellows completed the three-year fellowship.
- Nine fellows remained working in the target regions after the program.
- Eight fellows continued employment with their host organizations.
- Nine fellows passed the Bar Exam, and one pursued Department of Justice accreditation.
- Host organizations strengthened infrastructure, secured additional funding, and transitioned to independent removal defense practices.

*This bill* would make this a permanent program.

**Author's Statement:** According to the Author, "Many of the communities most affected by immigration enforcement, especially in rural and under served regions in 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. 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."

**Equity Implications:** Despite the dramatic need for legal representation among immigrants in general and unaccompanied migrant children in particular, the United States lacks enough free and low-cost immigration attorneys to meet that need.<sup>1</sup> Children, detained immigrants, asylum seekers, and people with limited English proficiency often face additional barriers in immigration proceedings. Legal representation can help these groups understand their rights, communicate effectively with authorities, and avoid errors that could lead to deportation or the loss of legal protection. *This bill* may help encourage attorneys to become trained in immigration proceedings and help increase the number of available attorneys.

**Double referral:** Should this bill pass out of this Committee, it will be referred to the Assembly Committee on Judiciary.

#### **RELATED AND PRIOR 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.

*AB 120 (Committee on Budget), Chapter 43, Statutes of 2023*, removed the requirement that contracts provide for legal services to unaccompanied minors on a fee-per-case basis and instead required CDSS to determine the funding method. Allowed grants to be used to provide immigration benefits and authorizes CDSS to approve a nonprofit legal service organization to receive a grant if it has at least three years of experience and has conducted trainings on immigration issues for persons beyond its staff.

*AB 135 (Committee on Budget), Chapter 85, Statutes of 2021*, among other things, established the Enhanced Services for Asylees and Vulnerable Noncitizens program to provide for persons granted asylum or who are eligible to receive refugee cash assistance and services as victims of crime, authorized CDSS to reallocate returned or declined funds among eligible counties and qualified nonprofit organizations for refugee social services programs, and repealed the July 1, 2022, sunset date for the rapid response program within CDSS.

*AB 2642 (Levine), Chapter 103, Statutes of 2018*, provided, in an effort to ensure that unaccompanied minors are able to apply for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status immigration relief, that a nonprofit charitable corporation not incorporated in this state may be appointed as the guardian of a minor if specified requirements are met, which included that (1) the nonprofit charitable corporation is licensed by this state to provide care for minors; (2) the nonprofit charitable corporation is contracted by the federal Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement to provide care and custody of the minor; and, (3) the petition for guardianship is filed in connection with a petition to make the necessary findings regarding special immigrant juvenile status.

*SB 89 (Committee on Budget and Fiscal Review), Chapter 24, Statutes of 2017*, funded legal services for immigration defense.

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<sup>1</sup> Assessing Access to Legal Representation for Unaccompanied Migrant Children: National, State, and County-Level Analysis of Free- and Low-Cost Attorney Prevalence in Relation to Children's Locations. *Journal on Migration and Human Security*. [dx.doi.org/10.1177/23315024251339778](https://doi.org/10.1177/23315024251339778)

**Arguments in Support:** A coalition of groups committed to supporting immigrant rights, including the bill sponsor Immigrant Defense Advocates, writes the following in support of codifying the five-year pilot project:

“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.”

**Arguments in Opposition:** None on file.

## **REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**

### **Support**

Immigrant Defense Advocates (Sponsor)

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 Department of Justice  
California Immigration Project  
Center for Gender & Refugee Studies–California  
Central Valley Immigrant Integration Collaborative  
Centro Binacional para el Desarrollo Indígena 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 Wendy Root Askew  
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  
Thai Community Development Center  
Vera Institute of Justice  
Watsonville Law Center

**Opposition**

None on file.

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