CARECEN’S HISTORY

In 1983, a group of Salvadoran refugees and volunteers in Los Angeles formed what eventually became the Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN), so that people fleeing the Salvadoran civil war could claim the same rights and benefits as war refugees from other countries. CARECEN volunteers met with lawmakers to tell them that immigration authorities were unfairly detaining and deporting these refugees and ignoring their asylum claims, which were as legitimate as those from any other country involved in a civil war.

CARECEN attorneys also represented detainees in court and hosted talks with immigrant community members to inform them of their rights. Volunteers conducted English classes and launched a food distribution program for detainees’ families. CARECEN organized international delegations, supported human rights work in El Salvador and played a significant role in the solidarity movement in support of the people of El Salvador and to end the civil war.

From the beginning, CARECEN’s work went beyond legal and social services to address public policy. CARECEN drew the American public’s attention to the unfair treatment of Central American refugees and campaigned to win for Salvadorans the same exemption from deportation as refugees fleeing war and violence in other countries. It also participated in lawsuits that eventually resulted in some measure of protection, including the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA) and, before that, the Immigration Act of 1990 that established Temporary Protective Status (TPS), a program that protects victims of persecution from deportation if their countries cannot take them because of civil war, natural disasters or other temporary conditions.

In the 1990s, CARECEN worked to win TPS for Salvadorans and helped thousands of people process their applications. We also took up the cause of other immigrants, including the fight against Proposition 187, the racist initiative that denied basic services and education to undocumented immigrants and their (often U.S.-born) children. To this day, the fight for the rights of all immigrants is at the heart of CARECEN’s mission. Our fight is animated by the drive to ensure that immigrants have the same chance as anyone else to become strong community leaders, fight for their rights, and improve their their lives and their communities.

Every effort of CARECEN’s today has a community organizing component. Under a hostile Trump administration, which is attacking immigrants almost daily, this aspect of our work has become crucial to the survival of our communities. Every department, from the legal and education staff to the Parent and Youth Center and the Day
Labor Center, participates in campaigns, coalitions and reform efforts to improve the lives of immigrants and help them succeed in this country.

CARECEN THIS YEAR
The November 2016 election that resulted in Donald Trump’s presidency was a game changer for CARECEN, as it was for all those who work for immigrant rights and a progressive agenda. Trump’s hateful rhetoric during the campaign was aimed squarely at immigrants, and he made good on his promises of persecution soon after the inauguration, with executive orders that made anyone without papers a priority for deportation and banned entry by people from certain Muslim-majority countries. This ban is currently being challenged in federal court. Trump gave Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials new license to persecute immigrants, and in the weeks before the inauguration, fresh fears permeated immigrant communities across Southern California.

With a new urgency, CARECEN responded by returning to its organizing roots. Every department has been involved. The weekend after the so-called Muslim ban was announced, CARECEN attorneys joined those from other nonprofit legal providers in rushing to LAX to provide help and counsel to incoming passengers from the affected countries who were being detained and denied access to attorneys or their families. Organizers and other staff also quickly planned a community organizing meeting days after the election, to allow our neighbors to speak of their feelings and plan a resistance response. More than 400 people attended, and after another general meeting, CARECEN began hosting regular popular assemblies to inform the community and collect their ideas for response to Trump administration initiatives.

Knowing that stepped-up raids and higher numbers of immigration arrests would soon mean few protections and a lack of due process for immigrants caught in law enforcement dragnets, CARECEN organizers also began to hold frequent know-your-rights workshops open to the entire community. There were also community dialogues that featured in-depth discussions of the causes of changing policies and what those changes meant at the local level and the grass roots.

Since 2012, TPS committee members had been laying the groundwork for a campaign to lobby for residency for TPS recipients, many of whom have been waiting for a decade and a half or more for the chance to gain permanent legal status. In the meantime, they had been spending thousands of dollars to reapply for work permits every year and a half, undergoing an FBI background check for every renewal. The work that committee members did over three weeks last summer on a nationwide survey of TPS recipients contributed to a major study sponsored by the University of Kansas and written by the distinguished scholar Cecilia Menjivar, PhD, of the School of Justice and Social Inquiry at Arizona State University. The study takes a close look at the lives and contributions of TPS recipients from El Salvador and Honduras, two of the largest groups of TPS beneficiaries.

In May, USCIS announced it was extending TPS designation for Haitians for only six more months, warning them to prepare to return to Haiti. Committee members immediately began planning work to save TPS for Haitians and for all TPS beneficiaries, turning the campaign for residency into a two-pronged strategy to argue for saving it first and making it a road to permanent residency second. That campaign is now in full swing. In June, CARECEN-LA’s TPS committee members joined 300 TPS activists from across the country in Washington D.C. to present Menjivar’s TPS study. They are continuing to wage this campaign nationwide with regional assemblies of TPS recipients and a national assembly of TPS recipients in Washington planned for October.

On September 5, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Program (DACA), which President Obama announced through executive order in 2012, would be coming to an end. This was a promise Trump had been making throughout his campaign, and polls showed his supporters were strongly behind him. But people from all

TPSianos in the corridors of power in May, Washington DC.
corners of the country, including a significant slice of Republican voters and politicians, reacted with rage at the prospect that almost 800,000 young people who had grown up as Americans could now be deported. Trump backtracked almost immediately, tweeting that he was giving Congress six months to come up with a legislative solution to grant legal status to these young people.

CARECEN moved quickly to organize a talk the day after the announcement to discuss the options for the students. It also ramped up outreach to universities, community colleges and DREAM Centers across Southern California to coordinate events to encourage students who qualified to apply for renewal of their DACA status. It is also speaking out to legislators, supporting a bipartisan DREAM Act that is already in the works in Congress (and demanding that it pass with no border security poison pills). At the state level, CARECEN advocated for a state measure that increased protections for all immigrants by limiting local police collaboration with federal immigration authorities. The measure passed, with some changes, on Sept. 15.

LEGAL SERVICES
CARECEN’s legal team provides services to about 24,000 people each year. After the DACA announcement, it became clear that DACA recipients whose permits expire before March 5, 2018 would have until October 5 to renew their DACA permits for two more years of legal status. By the end of the fiscal year, CARECEN had processed 820 DACA applications. Because of the announcement and outreach efforts, there is likely to be a significant increase of renewals in September 2017. But the renewed attention and campaign to save this status is likely to increase numbers of renewals for this month.

CARECEN’s legal staff has continued providing the services we have long been known for, and this year we filed 294 U Visa AOS applications, 408 U Visa applications, and 49 VAWA applications. We also currently are representing 215 unaccompanied children, helping them file at least one application for relief each. We also processed 359 green card renewal applications, 149 family petitions, and 124 applications for permanent residency. We completed 1,376 citizenship applications and provided classes to 280 legal permanent residents seeking citizenship. CARECEN hosted 24 citizenship workshops. We also provided 4,561 individual legal consultations. CARECEN saved immigrants a total of $519,710 in application fees for various immigration benefits.

ORGANIZING AND POLICY
For decades, CARECEN Parent and Youth Center organizers have continued to train parents to participate in policy-making regarding their children’s education. They present workshops about the intricacies of the Common Core standards and the Local Control Funding Formula, which has brought new resources to local school districts. Parent and youth leaders participate in monitoring committees at their schools to ensure that their voices are heard as during its implementation. The Parent Council served 187 people, and 238 participated in parent leadership workshops. Another 154 parents were involved in civic participation exercises, and the Parent and Youth Leadership Academy had 25. We also hosted 64 students who enrolled in the Central American Studies class from ELAC, and 87 who enrolled in the...
Youth Leadership Academy. Another 30 were involved in Masters and PhD workshops. The Center had help from 139 volunteers.

Educational enrichment programs also have been part of the plan to organize and empower adults, youth and children in our community. For several years, CARECEN has been offering a Summer STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics) program lasting six weeks for children from kindergarten to third grade. The program was designed to give them science and mathematics enrichment opportunities and the support they need to be successful in school. In 2017, the program served 10 children.

CARECEN’s highly successful College Head Start Program helps high school juniors and seniors navigate the difficult college application process and follows them through their first year to ensure they are adapting well. This year, 80 students enrolled. At the end of Success Week in November 2016, 147 students submitted applications to California State University, University of California, and other schools that accept the Common Application.

CARECEN’s Plaza Comunitaria/Casa Universitaria distance-learning programs are graduating a fifth generation of students. They continue to let adults learn at their own pace to earn elementary, middle school, high school, college and post-graduate degrees. This year, 559 adult students participated in Plaza Comunitaria and 56 participated in Casa Universitaria. Another 535 adult students took English as a Second Language classes.

This summer, the program also had its second annual six-week robotics workshop for children and parents that allowed both to learn the basics of programming and building machines. There are also English and citizenship classes at CARECEN headquarters, San Fernando Valley office, and at the County Service Center in Whittier to help applicants prepare for the citizenship exam.

This year, the CARECEN Day Labor Center served between 20 and 40 workers each day for a total of 5,748 workers. A total of 1,499 workers found employment opportunities. Many day laborers benefited from the center’s classes and seminars, including 105 who participated in English as a Second Language, 75 who participated in on-site workshops, and 319 who sought other services such as document translations or letters of recommendation. Day laborers continue to work against wage theft and for increasing the minimum wage. The CARECEN Day Labor Center also provided 58 referrals for medical screenings.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

As it has for the past 34 years, CARECEN will continue to champion the rights of Central American and other Latino immigrants, low-wage workers, parents, day laborers, youth and children, and to build a community that is proactive, aware of its rights and vigilant of its interests.

Our legal staff will continue to provide low-cost, quality immigration representation, fight notario fraud, and contribute to advocacy efforts for fair immigration policies. We look forward to coordinating with Congress members in Washington, California legislators, Los Angeles County and City government staff and elected officials, as well as other stakeholders, to promote programs and policies that benefit immigrants in our region. Our organizing efforts among day laborers, parents, and youth will also continue, because we know that the fight for workers’ rights and education reform IS the fight for immigrant rights.

Finally, we will continue to build the CARECEN team to fulfill our vision of making Los Angeles a place where Central Americans, as well as all other communities, can and do live in peace and dignity, enjoying economic well-being, social justice, and political empowerment.