



CARECEN Annual report 2019

Our history

In 1983, a group of Salvadoran refugees and human rights advocates in Los Angeles formed what eventually became the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN), to fight to protect the rights of Central American immigrants and secure legal status for the thousands fleeing the violence of civil war.

CARECEN attorneys began providing legal services, representing detainees in court and hosting informational forums for community members so they understood their rights. In addition, volunteers taught English classes and launched a food distribution program to support refugee 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 Salvadoran people to end the civil war.

From the beginning, CARECEN knew its work needed to go beyond the scope of legal and social services, and 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. CARECEN met with lawmakers to address the unfair detainment and deportation of refugees, ignoring their asylum claims, which were just as legitimate as asylum claims from other countries. In addition, CARECEN participated in a series of lawsuits that eventually resulted in some measure of protections for refugees. This includes the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA); as well as the Immigration Act of 1990 that established Temporary Protected Status (TPS), a program that protects individuals from deportation and allows them to lawfully live and work in the U.S. if their countries cannot take

them because of civil war, natural disasters or other temporary conditions. CARECEN worked to win TPS for Salvadorans and helped thousands of people process their applications. In the 1990s, CARECEN fought against California's racist Proposition 187 initiative, which denied basic services and education to undocumented immigrants and their (U.S.-born) children.

To this day, the fight for the rights of all immigrants is at the heart of CARECEN's mission. We are pledged to ensure that immigrants have the same chance as anyone else to become strong community leaders who are able to improve their lives and their communities. In its more than 35 years of existence, CARECEN has grown from a small grassroots group to the largest Central American organization in the country, providing high-quality immigration legal services and organizing, policy, and advocacy programs.

Today, all of CARECEN's work focuses on supporting and protecting families, as well as improving systems and advancing



policies and laws that support immigrant communities, people of color and low wage workers. CARECEN focuses on community organizing, leadership development and making sure that affected communities have a voice in determining their future. Under a hostile Trump administration, which attacks immigrant families on a daily basis, this aspect of our work has become crucial to the survival of our communities. Every department, from the legal department, 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 in 2019

In the past year, CARECEN has been on the front lines dealing with the growing humanitarian crisis at the southern border. The federal government, fueled by the xenophobic and racist policies of the Trump administration, is doing everything possible to slow down, drastically limit, or flatly deny the asylum process for Central American migrants. This has created a horrendous complex of health and safety problems in border towns like Tijuana. In response CARECEN created the Refugee Project, which aims to support Central American migrants and refugees as they seek safety, freedom, and stability.

The Refugee Project uses a holistic approach. Our team of legal staff and organizers has worked closely with community centers, organizations, and shelters near the border to assist and support refugees. We have raised funds and organized in-kind donations, such as tents, clothing, and food, to help the

refugees with their immediate needs. We have provided them with legal aid and medical attention, and accompanied them as they approached ports of entry to request asylum. The Refugee Project also confronts what we see as the immoral and illegal U.S. response to asylum-seekers and refugees, and addresses the root causes of Central American migration in their home countries.

CARECEN provides direct legal services to Central American migrants and refugees so that they understand their rights as they approach the U.S. border and after their entry into the country. We assist people with their legal cases to pursue asylum, seek other immigration relief, or to fight their orders of deportation. We

have had to remain agile and responsive in order to provide these services where the people need them most—whether in Mexico, in detention centers, or in the local community.

Beyond direct legal services, we have expanded our impact litigation efforts to address discrimination against Central Americans in the asylum process—among other critical legal issues. Currently, CARECEN is a plaintiff in a case led by the ACLU that questions the President’s power to prohibit asylum interviews at certain points of entry. Impact litigation will allow us to stop imminent harm against Central American migrants in a broad way that will benefit hundreds of thousands of people, now and in the future.

In March, CARECEN joined SHARE-El Salvador’s delegation to Honduras. The delegation’s aim was to learn about the root causes of the recent exodus out of the country. Our organizers met with several Honduran communities and activists who have been fighting the construction of hydroelectric dams, mining near local rivers, and the disproportionate use of military force against rural activists. When CARECEN organizers met with the community of Guapinol, they witnessed first-hand how the entire community was under constant military surveillance, often jailed, and threatened with death. These constant threats terrorize the community daily, and like so many Hondurans, several of the people of Guapinol are considering leaving the country. Although the situation is bleak, there is still cause for hope. Activist communities are fighting for systemic change in hopes that they too will not have to leave their beloved homeland.

Our organizers took what they learned from the Honduras delegation and applied it to their work with the Refugee Project. In late July, Refugee Project leaders led a delegation of asylum seekers, legal and policy experts, and Honduran human rights defenders to Washington D.C. to meet with members of Congress and host a briefing, called “Beyond the Border—Root Causes of Central American Migration.” Participants in the delegation were able to share their experiences in powerful testimony before more than 40 Congressional members and staff. Our delegation member



Shopping for essentials at the border

Delegation to Honduras





"Beyond the Border" delegation at the U.S. Capitol.

Edgar, for example, fled Honduras after he was persecuted by state military forces for his work as an LGBTQ+ human rights defender. Members of Congress heard about similar experiences that linked the ongoing refugee crisis to the disastrous effects of U.S. military aid in Central America. At the end of our delegation, we asked members of Congress to sign on to the Berta Caceres Human Rights Act (HR 1945), which calls for Congress to suspend millions of dollars of military aid that funds the government of Honduras. The passage of this Act would send a clear message to Central American leaders; the region would no longer have the funds to commit violent atrocities with impunity.

In addition to our international policy work, the National TPS Alliance and CARECEN worked together to bring about a 4-day conference, called the TPS Peoples Summit, to D.C. in February. Thousands of TPS holders descended on the nation's capital from all over the country in order to advocate for permanent residency for more than 450,000 TPS-holders. The summit gave TPS-holders the opportunity to participate in workshops and trainings on legislative advocacy, strategic communications, and organizing and leadership development. With the tools provided, TPS-holders took part in hundreds of legislative visits with members of Congress from both parties. In addition, the summit held a Day of Action in collaboration with several D.C. organizations, such as Working Families United and UndocuBlack. Providing TPS-holders with leadership tools is critical in being able to shape the conversation around TPS.

Although we have made great strides in pushing back against the federal administration's anti-immigrant agenda, our community still faces significant challenges. The recent announcement by USCIS Acting Director Ken Cuccinelli about "Public Charge" is an additional punishment that effectively targets working class immigrants, the elderly and disabled population. It

creates additional restrictions that limits their ability to gain access to the legal immigration system. The benefits that the administration highlights in this new rule change are benefits that would not be accessible to the majority of immigrant applicants. While there are a limited number of immigrants that qualify for benefits, it is small in comparison to the billions of dollars immigrants contribute to the economy and the social security system of this country. Clearly, this new attack is a way for the federal government to scare, confuse and further intimidate our community.

At this moment in history, it is crucial that we build a national voice for the Central American community that takes into account the needs and priorities of the over 3.4 million Central Americans living in this country, including naturalized citizens, TPS recipients, unaccompanied minors, and recent migrants and refugees. We are dedicated to advocating for a Central American political agenda that prioritizes Central American families and focuses on addressing the root causes of Central American migration. CARECEN is uniquely poised to lead this effort due to our history, our successful record, and our commitment to Central American empowerment. With your support, we can ensure that immigrant and refugee communities can be protected and thrive for years to come.



TPS activists at the May Day march

Legal Services

Overall, CARECEN has continued to provide high quality, affordable immigration legal services to the immigrant community in Southern California. Our Legal Services Department provides services to 25,000 people each year.

At the same time that CARECEN responds to immediate changes in immigration policy, the legal staff also continue to provide the services for which we are historically known, including 35 VAWA Petitions, 12 T-Visas, 311 U-Visas, and 186 U-Visa Adjustment of Status through our Survivors of Violence Unit. We also continued to process DACA renewal applications, that have now totaled to 1,970. Recently, CARECEN expanded the unaccompanied

legal unit to become the Deportation Defense Unit, which provides representation to both children and adults. This year the Deportation Defense Unit took on 61 legal representation cases for unaccompanied minors, and we currently actively represent over 300 unaccompanied children. Knowing that under this administration, the only real protection from detention and deportation is attainment of legal status, CARECEN increased its naturalization services. This year, CARECEN hosted 27 citizenship workshops in different areas across Los Angeles County and processed 922 citizenship applications.



May Day march

Organizing and Policy

CARECEN's organizing, advocacy and policy teams worked on ongoing deportation defense, workers' rights and education reform campaigns and projects. This was a particularly active year for our organizers

The organizing team from the Parent and Youth Center worked tirelessly to develop the leadership of immigrant parents and students and train them in civic engagement at all levels. Parents and youth learn about the intricacies of the Common Core standards and the Local Control Funding Formula, which has brought new resources to local school districts. This year we trained over 250 parents on ways to improve the quality of education their children receive. Educational enrichment programs also have been part of the plan to organize and



An organizing meeting in the Parent Center



Dia de Jornaleros at City Hall.

empower adults, youth and children in our community. This year the Youth Leadership program that aims at developing organizing skills and a civic conscience in young people had 93 participants. Additionally, CARECEN's highly successful College Head Start Program helped 255 high school juniors and seniors navigate the difficult college application process and followed them through their first year to ensure they were adapting well.

The CARECEN Day Labor Center serves mainly to match immigrant workers with job providers for fair wages. Many day laborers benefited from the center's classes and seminars, which included English as a Second Language, leadership development, workers' rights advocacy, and health workshops. This year, day laborers continue to work against wage theft and increasing the minimum wage for approximately 80 individuals daily.

Looking ahead

As it has for the past 36 years, CARECEN will continue to champion the rights of Central American and other Latino immigrants, low-wage workers, parents, day laborers, youth and children. We will work to build a community that is proactive, aware of its rights and vigilant of its interests.

Our legal staff will continue to provide quality immigration representation, fight notario fraud, and contribute to advocacy efforts for fair immigration policies. We look forward to continued collaboration with Congress members in Washington, California legislators, Los Angeles County and City elected officials and staff, the National TPS Alliance, as well as other stakeholders, to promote programs and policies that benefit immigrants and refugees in our region. Our organizing efforts among day laborers, parents, and youth will also continue, because we know that supporting workers and improving education is essential to 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, will live in peace and dignity, enjoying economic well-being, social justice, and political empowerment.