CARECEN's 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 to provide legal services, representing detainees in court and hosting informational forums for community members to inform them of 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.

It became quickly apparent that CARECEN needed to go beyond the scope of legal and social services, and address public policy that would have profound long-term effects on a growing Central American community. CARECEN drew the American public’s attention to the unfair treatment of Central American refugees and campaigned for Salvadorans to receive the same exemption from deportation as refugees fleeing war and violence in other countries. CARECEN met with lawmakers who had been ignoring the legitimate asylum claims of detained and deported Central American refugees, while at the same time accepting asylum claims from other countries affected by civil war. In addition, CARECEN participated in a series of lawsuits that eventually resulted in some measure of protection 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.

The fight for immigrant rights continues to be at the heart of CARECEN’s mission. Ensuring that immigrants have the opportunity to become strong community leaders, improve their lives and their communities is our organizational drive. In its more than 30 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 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. Although the Trump administration’s attacks on immigrant families over the course of his tenure have come to an end, our work remains crucial to the survival of immigrant communities everywhere. Every department, from Legal, to our Parent and Youth Center and Day Labor Center, participates in campaigns, coalitions, and reform efforts to improve the lives of immigrants and help them succeed in this country.
THE FIGURES

$86,400 FOR COVID RELIEF TO IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IN LOS ANGELES

$30,000 FROM THE NATIONAL TPS ALLIANCE FOR HURRICANE RELIEF IN CENTRAL AMERICA

2,243 DACA RENEWALS

1,233 DAY LABORERS ASSISTED AT OUR DAY LABOR CENTER
2020 will forever be marked as a turning point in our nation’s history. This year we encountered the contentious election for the presidency, systemic racism on full display, a steep rise in white supremacy, and using misinformation as a weapon to undermine our political process. Furthermore, we learned that the fight for immigrant rights is intricately linked to the fight for Black lives so it was important for CARECEN to stand in solidarity with Black-led movements and organizers, such as Black Lives Matters and the Haitian Bridge Alliance, who actively speak out against racism and injustice. It was inspiring to see BLM protesters and activists respond with love and support in the form of mutual aid, coalition building, pressuring our elected officials, and actively dismantling lies that continue to permeate our national discourse. With this in mind, CARECEN has fought to minimize the unequal impact this pandemic has across the class, racial and ethnic divide. In particular, the undocumented community who continues to experience the effects of COVID-19 at a disproportionate rate. With little to no access to financial relief, many immigrant families continued putting their lives at risk as essential workers in order to survive the economic fallout.

In this time of crisis, CARECEN continues to conduct community surveys to understand current needs, allowing us to adapt to the ever-changing landscape of life in a pandemic. Early on it became clear that our most vulnerable immigrants and refugees have limited access to support systems necessary to their survival. The immigrant population makes up 35% of Los Angeles County and despite being an integral part of our communities, they face barriers to health, housing, jobs, and other vital resources. The pandemic continues to highlight the detrimental effects these barriers have on the most vulnerable who have limited to no access to government aid. CARECEN stepped in as a safety net, providing emergency relief efforts through economic aid, food distribution, and advocacy. In March, with the help of foundations and private donors, we established the Immigrant Families Fund (IFF) to provide economic assistance to families experiencing economic hardship in the surrounding areas of Koreatown, Pico-Union/Westlake, and McArthur Park. Through this fund, we have been able to assist 288 families by providing them $300 in economic assistance. We later collaborated with the State on its Disaster Relief Assistance for Immigrants (DRAI) Project to extend our economic aid efforts to the entire county of Los Angeles. As our team distributed food and financial support, we quickly learned that surviving the pandemic meant a complete restructuring of our service model. Where once our services required in-person consultations or direct support, we moved to a virtual model to provide all consultations and services remotely to ensure the safety of community members, as well as staff.

While economic aid and food assistance remain critical issues for immigrant families, there is also the challenge of navigating life via a strictly virtual education model. Participants of our Parent and Youth Center have had very limited access to the internet and technology to participate in school or gain access to other critical educational services. For CARECEN’s youth, many faced the difficult decision of choosing their education or joining the workforce to help their families survive. It became necessary to provide an alternative support system that met the needs of the youth and provide resources for their parents who were experiencing work instability. In response, CARECEN continues to hold bi-weekly virtual workshops with parents and youth through our parent council, to inform them of the latest LAUSD communications.
Facilitating these virtual workshops allows space for parents and youth to communicate the challenges they face as they cope with the transition to online schooling and unemployment. Additionally, this space is a platform for discussions around current events, like the historical significance of the Black Lives Matter movement, workshops on current education policies, and elections that will have a direct impact on them. Parents have a monthly check-in with LAUSD board office members to address concerns, such as health, safety, technology, and resource gaps for underserved families. Also maintaining and reaching academic achievement for all students, including those in special education, foster youth, and English Language Learners.

As the country relied on the essential workforce to weather the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, the Trump administration continued attacks on TPS recipients by attempting to dismantle protections for TPS holders nationwide. In response, the National TPS Alliance with CARECEN launched a second Journey for Justice Bus Tour. From September 21 to November 13, 2020, the bus, famously known as “La Libertad,” once again took to the open road, traveling across the country to uplift TPS holders and other immigrant families. This grassroots approach directly challenged the horrendous policies of the Trump administration by placing the voices of TPS holder’s front and center. In addition to our nationwide efforts, the TPS community came together through its “Only the People Save the People” Campaign, to collectively raise nearly $30,000 in the wake of the disastrous hurricanes, Eta and Iota. All proceeds went to provide aid to displaced Hondurans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans who were in need of medicine, shelter, and food.

If we are to survive this pandemic threat, we must do so together. We are dedicated to advocating for a Central American political agenda that incorporates Central American families and addresses the root causes of Central American migration. CARECEN is uniquely poised to lead this effort due to our deep ties in the Central American immigrant struggle, 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.
**LEGAL SERVICES**

Despite COVID-19, CARECEN continues to provide its high-quality, affordable immigration legal services to the immigrant community. Our Legal Services Department continued to provide virtual services to over **25,000 people** this year.

While responding to immediate changes in immigration policy this year, our legal staff completed the following services:

- **Survivors of Violence Unit:** 17 VAWA Petitions, 21 VAWA Adjustment of Status filings, 6 T-Visas, 1 T-Visa adjustment of status filing, 160 U-Visas, and 112 U-Visa Adjustment of Status

- **DACA & Naturalization:** 2243 DACA Renewal filings. CARECEN also virtually hosted 6 citizenship workshops, processed 598 citizenship applications, provided 1,726 individual legal consultations.

- **CARECEN’s Deportation Defense Unit:** This year the Deportation Defense Unit helped release 25 adults from ICE custody, filed 35 SIJS (Special Immigrant Juveniles), applications with USCIS, 50 asylum applications, and actively represent 415 minors and adults in removal proceedings.

**CAMILA ALVAREZ, ESQ. APPOINTED LEGAL DIRECTOR**

At the start of Fall Camila Alvarez, former Managing Attorney for the Deportation Defense Unit was named Legal Director of CARECEN. Camila will build and execute CARECEN’s legal strategy, continue to strengthen the direct legal services, and manage and develop CARECEN’s legal department. She will lead the team of **70 employees** that make up the growing legal department.

---

**160**

U-Visas Processed

**598**

Citizenship Applications Processed

**415**

Currently Representing in Removal Proceeding
ORGANIZING, ADVOCACY, AND POLICY

In addition, 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 despite the difficulties of having to work remotely.

The Parent and Youth Center staff worked tirelessly to ensure leadership and civic participation of immigrant parents and students remained accessible. With our help, over 104 parents advocated for quality education for their children and voiced their concerns regarding the virtual learning model, which was not always conducive to the education of their children. Educational enrichment programs have also been part of the plan to organize and empower adults, youth and children in our community. This year CARECEN launched its Recently Arrived Youth Cohort, aimed to provide support and community to youth who have recently migrated to the U.S. 24 youth members completed the 7-week program. Our Youth Leadership program, which aims at developing organizing skills and a civic conscience in young people, had 26 participants. Additionally, CARECEN’s highly successful College Head Start Program helped over 162 high school juniors and seniors navigate the difficult college application process and followed them through their first year to ensure they were adapting well to a distance-learning model of education.

The CARECEN Day Labor Center (DLC) serves to match immigrant workers with job providers for fair wages and advocate for worker’s rights. This year our DLC became a COVID-19 Resource Center for workers. Their usual classes and seminars adapted to the reality of pandemic life. They were taught the importance of following COVID safety protocols when accepting work (i.e., usage of face masks, social distancing, hygiene), social media as a communication tool, and online job search. Even as work dwindled in the pandemic, our center still managed to serve 1,233 individuals.
Fortunately, the incoming Biden administration comes in with a renewed sense of hope and responsibility. Though this is welcomed news, we must still address the horrendous policies set in place by the previous administration. It is critical that organizations such as CARECEN continue to remain vigilant and steadfast in our efforts to pressure the government to address the lack of support for immigrants throughout this crisis. We cannot let this opportune time pass without galvanizing our community to fight for policy changes at all levels.

It is time to ensure that our elected leaders keep their promises to the immigrant community. For our part, CARECEN will continue to champion the rights of Central American and other Latino immigrants, low-wage workers, parents, day laborers, youth and children as it has done so for the past 37 years. We will continue to build a proactive community aware of its rights and vigilant of its interests.

Our legal staff will continue to provide quality immigration representation 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 government staff and elected officials, 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 the fight for immigrant rights. Even though the pandemic limits our ability to do in-person consultations, we continue to provide these services in a responsive fashion – whether it is online, in detention centers, or at the local community level. Together we can make Los Angeles a place where we can live in peace and dignity, enjoy economic well-being, social justice, and political empowerment.