

Massachusetts has a long tradition of welcoming all who seek a stable place to live and the opportunity to improve life for themselves and their families. Whether it be defending unaccompanied minors against wrongful deportation, assisting foreign-born residents in accessing housing and education supports, or offering community workshops to educate immigrant populations about their rights, civil legal aid programs work to ensure just and equal treatment for everyone who calls Massachusetts home.



Protecting the Rights of Immigrants

In FY17, MLAC-funded civil legal aid programs closed 1,664 immigration cases. The positive impact of legal aid, however, extends far beyond direct representation. Through “Know Your Rights” workshops, civil legal aid programs also help immigrants and refugees advocate for themselves and maintain safe and stable lives. Since the 2016 election, changes in federal immigration policy have caused a sustained surge in the number of people seeking help with immigration-related matters. Without additional resources, civil legal aid programs will be unable to respond to the increased need for services in their communities.



80%
TURNED AWAY

Civil legal aid programs in Massachusetts are forced to turn away 80% of eligible residents who seek assistance with immigration matters.

Vital Contributions to Our Communities

- According to the Census Bureau, 15.7% of Massachusetts residents are foreign-born, and they work in a variety of fields, including but not limited to the hotel and restaurant industries, education, research, health care, and technology.
- Immigrants help build and sustain our state’s economy. Immigrants are 30% more likely to start their own business than are native-born Americans. These new businesses create jobs and spur economic growth.
- As consumers, immigrants boost demand for local goods—with \$31 billion in estimated purchasing power in Massachusetts, according to research from New American Economy—and as workers, they guarantee a strong labor force to sustain existing industries.

Civil legal aid is critical to ensuring that immigrants continue to play these vital roles, making the Commonwealth stronger and more prosperous.

Protecting Rights

All residents have a right to due process. Legal assistance helps immigrants and refugees who face a variety of social and legal challenges:

- Changing and sometimes conflicting immigration policies at the federal, state, and municipal level can make the law difficult to navigate. Civil legal aid provides information and training to help long-time residents understand their rights and responsibilities, and also provides representation to immigrants in complex legal proceedings.

- Fear of potentially negative interactions with law enforcement, deportation, and loss of housing and other resources often keeps undocumented immigrants who are experiencing domestic violence from reporting the abuse to authorities. Civil legal aid helps survivors get the protections and stability they need.
- Dishonest businesses take advantage of language and cultural barriers to deprive employees of wages, overtime pay, or information on workplace safety regulations. All workers deserve a fair wage and a safe working environment, and legal aid protects these rights.
- After fleeing violence, disaster, or oppression, refugees from around the world seek safety in the United States. Legal aid attorneys can assist refugees in applying for asylum so they can begin new lives in peace in Massachusetts.

Civil Legal Aid Provides Protection and Stability for Families

Beto was born in El Salvador, where his family endured violence during and after the country's civil war. When Beto was just a few years old, his father left the country after being targeted by violent gangs. After he left, Beto's mother was targeted because their family was known for taking positions in opposition to the gangs and because she was a single mother. In 2004, fearing for their lives, Beto and his mother fled El Salvador to find safety with Beto's father in the U.S. They arrived traumatized by all they had suffered in El Salvador. Beto's father had been granted temporary protected status in the U.S., but Beto and his mother arrived too late to gain the same protection, and lived without legal status.

In 2007, Beto's mother was detained during immigration raids in New Bedford. Being pregnant, she was soon released, but she was put into removal proceedings. While his mother proceeded with her claims for refuge in the U.S., Beto started school and adjusted to life in his new home. The older Beto became, the more he became aware of his undocumented status. Particularly because his mother was in removal proceedings, he was concerned for the safety and future of his family. Beto was also keenly aware of the fact that, without status, he would not be able to go on to college or build a future in the place that had become his home.

All that changed with the creation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in 2012. Greater Boston Legal Services, which had assisted Beto's mother when she was detained, registered Beto for DACA. Having DACA status gave Beto the protection and hope that he needed to excel; he received numerous awards for his academic achievements, played several sports at his high school, and completed a six-week disability awareness program to become a more conscious member of his community. DACA also provided Beto with work authorization, a driver's license, and a social security number, making it possible to work and save money for his education and help support his family. He's now a freshman in college and plans to study engineering.

The specter of his mother's removal hangs over Beto and his family, and President Trump's announcement of the termination of DACA puts Beto's future further in jeopardy. Given the family's history of being targeted in El Salvador, they fear what might happen if Beto and his mother are deported. The family's lawyers—like those at civil legal aid programs around the state—are fighting to keep the family together and safe in the face of great uncertainty.