

Immigration Rights

Immigration enriches and deepens America's democracy by making it more culturally, socially, and politically diverse, but current laws and policies make it challenging for immigrant communities to thrive and live healthy, fulfilling lives free of fear. Our work on immigration rights supports efforts to advance more just and humane policies. We focus on addressing how immigration laws are enforced and curbing the use of criminal justice measures so immigrant communities are no longer regular targets of punitive practices. We work to deepen existing alliances and build bridges with new partners to influence decision-makers more effectively.

Portfolio Snapshot

Budget
\$7.5 million

Number of Grantees
26

BUILD Budget
\$16.7 million

BUILD Grantees
8

The Challenge

The US immigration system is broken, relying on harsh and punitive enforcement as its singular policy response. Under the Obama administration, immigration enforcement was severe, with more than 2.5 million people deported. The current administration has exacerbated and intensified the machinery of enforcement even further: deporting longtime

legal permanent residents for minor, nonviolent infractions; enlisting local authorities to participate in immigration enforcement; effectively ending international obligations to asylum seekers; and separating families at America's southern border as a particularly cruel means of deterrence.

Throughout most of history, immigration irregularities have been treated as civil matters. Today, however, unauthorized entry is America's most prosecuted federal crime, accounting for more than half of all federal cases. Despite unauthorized entry from Mexico reaching its lowest levels since 1969, narratives about an out-of-control border have fueled a [1,450 percent increase](#) in border patrol funding over the past two decades. Federal spending on immigration enforcement outstrips all other federal criminal law enforcement agencies combined—more than \$19 billion per year.

The Opportunity

In the face of these challenges, we've witnessed the rise of a well-coordinated, innovative, and rather fearless immigrant rights movement that effectively engages in efforts, such as mass mobilizations led by affected communities and cutting-edge legal and legislative advocacy. This movement has secured policies that limit local law enforcement collaboration with federal immigration authorities in more than 600 cities and counties and helped especially vulnerable communities from countries experiencing unsafe or difficult situations maintain [Temporary Protected Status](#). While many of these gains remain threatened at the federal level, the movement has driven deep, narrative-changing efforts that have gone from niche to national, leading to a countervailing wave of support for immigrants.

By bolstering long-standing immigrant rights grantees in key states, we believe we can create significant change at the state and local levels. In this era of heightened enforcement, litigation is a powerful backstop against excessive, unconstitutional attempts to target immigrants, and we believe we can be instrumental in having an impact with our long history and expertise in funding litigation.

Our Aim and Approach

To establish more just and humane immigration policies, we focus on deepening alliances between advocacy organizations and other players, ranging from business leaders to local government, curbing the use of criminal

justice measures for immigration purposes, and supporting groups that demand increased transparency and accountability from government agencies such as Customs and Border Protection. We focus on four key areas:

- **Ensuring policies uphold immigrant rights.** We support advocacy at local, state, and federal levels to ensure that enforcement-related policies and practices respect the rights of immigrants.
- **Litigation to protect immigrant rights.** We support coordinated and high-impact strategic litigation for immigrants to prevent or overturn harsh measures and expand protections.
- **Strengthening positive narratives and public support.** We build public will for immigration policies that respect the inherent rights and dignity of immigrant communities.
- **Fostering a broad set of allies.** We cultivate advocates across issues, regions, and the political spectrum, enhancing the capacity and responsiveness of local and state immigrant rights groups.

Our Impact

By advancing reformed immigration policies and reduced reliance on criminal law enforcement systems, our aim is to ensure that immigrant communities are no longer regular targets of arbitrary and punitive enforcement and that their voices are heard and their rights are protected throughout the immigration process. We work toward four critical outcomes:

- **Fair and just policies for immigrants.** At the federal level, advocates will promote fair and just policies for immigrants, such as due process protections, judicial review, eliminating mandatory detention, and providing universal access to counsel in deportation proceedings.
- **Immigrant communities will have a greater voice.** In select states and localities, we will support immigrant communities and their allies to influence government and decision-makers to create policies that affirmatively protect immigrants, and overturn and prevent excessively punitive policies and practices.
- **Increased transparency and accountability at the border.** Border communities will secure increased transparency and accountability from Customs and Border Protection.
- **Support for immigrants will grow.** Organizations working on immigration enforcement reform will leverage a broad range of supporters and strengthen their capacities to communicate and create a deeper base to influence decision-makers effectively.

Ford's Gender, Racial and Ethnic Justice program supports courageous people and organizations addressing critical issues that exacerbate inequality in the United States and the Global South: the over-policing and mass incarceration of people of color, the demonization of immigrants and migrants, alarming levels of violence targeting women and girls, and the dramatic increase in laws curtailing reproductive rights.

Grantee Snapshot

Building a coalition of crusaders

Detention Watch Network (DWN) is a coalition that builds power through collective advocacy, grassroots organizing, and strategic communications to abolish immigration detention in the United States. Its membership is diverse in terms of sector, age, geography, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and immigrant/refugee background. DWN has members in 22 states with a goal of investing more heavily in California, Florida, and Texas. The network has taken part in the #DefundHate campaign to stop federal funding of aggressive immigration enforcement and deadly immigration jails.

Photo courtesy of: Steve Pavey for Detention Watch Network

