

ACACIA CENTER FOR JUSTICE

2025

YEAR IN REVIEW



ACACIA
CENTER FOR JUSTICE



Artwork by Natalie Bui

SHAINA'S VIEW

2025

In 2025, the immigration system became the tip of the metaphorical spear in testing due process under the law in the United States. Arbitrary arrests intensified, legal pathways narrowed, and the longstanding federal legal safety net programs that support access to justice for people targeted for detention and deportation were reduced, suspended, or eliminated altogether. The result has been a system increasingly defined by fragmentation and unmoored from the rule-of-law: family members separated and whisked away without warning, children left without protection and support, and individuals detained, transferred and expelled to third countries with little opportunity to assert their rights or connect with legal counsel.

At the Acacia Center for Justice, our work has always been grounded in a simple principle: no one should be forced to navigate the immigration system alone. For four years, Acacia has served as a national backbone for publicly funded legal representation – building infrastructure, best practices standards, and partnerships to ensure community members, children and families have meaningful access to justice and due process.

That foundation remains essential. But in 2025, it was also tested. Federal access to justice programs were terminated, interrupted, or narrowed in scope, and tears began to appear in the fabric of legal protection: especially for children, families, and individuals in detention who relied on these programs as their only point of access to counsel. Funding gaps created sudden ruptures in representation. Entire regions faced diminished legal capacity. Critical safeguards that once functioned as a floor for due process were no longer guaranteed, and legal access – essential to ensuring people in detention or in immigration court understand the complexity of the system and their legal options – was severely constrained and intentionally dismantled. This lack of legal access has been shown to affect people without regard to legal status, as even US citizens have been caught up in the dragnet.

Our response has not been to abandon the national infrastructure supporting constitutional safeguards, but to labor in concert with the legal community to reinforce it.

Today, Acacia’s work reflects the immigration legal field’s response to defend constitutional rights throughout the full lifecycle of individuals’ interactions with an immigration justice system that has been intentionally upended. We operate across multiple points of intervention — before harm occurs, during moments of crisis, and when rights are violated — ensuring that protection does not disappear when public systems retreat.

Our programs continue to anchor legal representation at scale, particularly for children, people with disabilities, and people facing arbitrary detention. At the same time, we have expanded our capacity to respond where federal funding can no longer reach or move quickly enough.

In January 2025 following our intensive scenario planning process, we launched a unique national partnership with legal and community services organizations throughout the country. The National Immigrant Legal Responders Alliance (NILRA) is the coordinating body for a nationwide alliance of over 100 rapid legal responders, committed to acting to preserve legal rights and defend immigrant and citizen community members when surges in DHS forces outpace existing legal infrastructure. NILRA coordinates rapid legal response — connecting community alerts, legal responders, pro bono capacity, and strategic litigation — so that individuals are not left without access to counsel simply because a program ended, or a region lacks infrastructure.

Through Witness for Justice, we are shining a light on a system designed to operate in the shadows. Immigration courts are public tribunals yet increasingly operate without meaningful public oversight. By training, supporting, and uplifting the work of volunteers bearing witness in public immigration court proceedings, we are laboring to restore transparency and accountability at a moment when both are under threat in the immigration system.

Within the work of NILRA, the Habeas Bridge Project evolved to intervene when the system breaks the law outright. As people are ripped away from their community and legal counsel and detention expands, this project supports emergency habeas filings to prevent unlawful detention and removal, providing a critical backstop when administrative safeguards fail.

And through our Family Reunification work, we address the human cost of these systemic failures. When legal access disappears, separation follows. This work centers children’s safety and well-being, maintaining kinship connection, and continuity of care: seeking not only to defend rights, but to repair harm created by policy and practice.

These efforts are not parallel tracks. They are the reinforcement of a fabric under strain. Together, they respond to the reality that public funding alone – while vital – can no longer serve as the guarantor of due process. Legal protection today must be adaptive, coordinated, and collective to withstand the pressures placed upon it.

Acacia’s role in this new era is not to replace public systems, but to stabilize them: to connect public resources to local expertise, crisis response to long-term defense, accountability to representation, and repair to prevention. Our strength lies in coordination at scale, under pressure, and with integrity.

As we look ahead, our commitment is clear: to mend the tears where they appear, to move with agility to reinforce access to justice where people are most at risk, and to ensure that due process does not unravel precisely when it is needed most.

Thank you to our partners, funders, legal service providers, volunteers, and community members who make this work possible. We are honored to stand with you and lean into this community at such a critical time.

With warmth and solidarity,

A handwritten signature in gold ink that reads "Shaina Aber". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first and last names being more prominent.

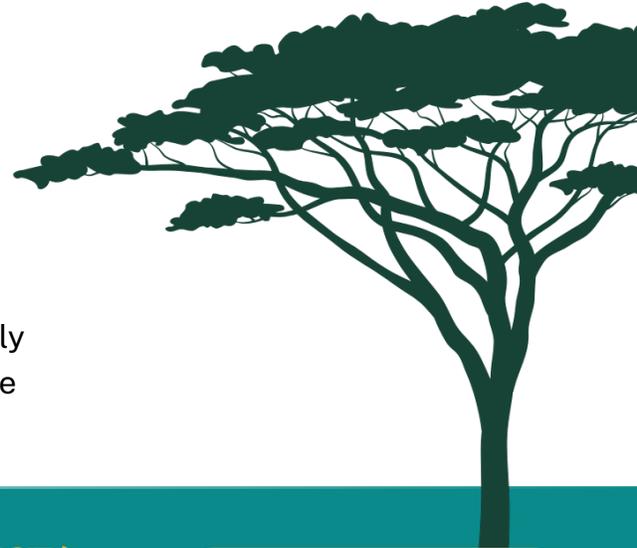
SHAINA ABER

Executive Director



Protecting Public Investments in Due Process

In 2025, Acacia remained committed to safeguarding programs that ensure equal access to justice so that vulnerable community members, loved ones, friends, and neighbors caught up in this administration's rapidly escalating deportation dragnet do not have to navigate the immigration system alone.



Unaccompanied Children Program (UCP)

2025 was an unprecedented year for attacks on children's rights. Through it all, Acacia has continued to provide critical oversight, affirming our commitment to the young clients that our network defends.

Without the help of children's legal advocates, thousands more unaccompanied children would be forced to stand before a judge and defend their cases alone, facing a government-trained attorney without any legal representation of their own. While funding has never been sufficient to ensure representation for every unaccompanied child, the Unaccompanied Children Program (UCP) has provided critical legal advocacy to children who arrive in the United States without a parent or legal guardian since 2003, so that they do not have to navigate a complex legal system alone.

30,000
children represented
by attorneys





Acacia has been the primary contractor for the Unaccompanied Children Program since December 2023. In that time, Acacia added to the network's reach by inviting new partners, fostering collaboration and knowledge-sharing between attorneys nationwide, and nurturing expertise and capacity across the field.



In March of 2025, the administration terminated funding for representation of unaccompanied children, plunging the future of tens of thousands of children into uncertainty. In the absence of these services, many children were forced to go to court alone while in government custody.



The public showed up to rally in support of unaccompanied children, sending more than 130,000 letters to Congress in just a month, demanding that children be protected. After an order from a federal judge, funding for the program was restored in May.



Though the road ahead remains uncertain, we will never stop fighting to protect the due process rights of children.

Evelyn is a twelve year old girl from Mexico



From a young age, she has survived many traumatic events

Before coming to the US, she was labor trafficked at the young age of five years old



At home, she endured severe abuse at the hands of her caretakers, who were her extended family members



For reasons outside of her control, Evelyn ended up in the US. But instead of finding safety and care, she found herself navigating a confusing legal system, alone.



That's when GHIRP came along

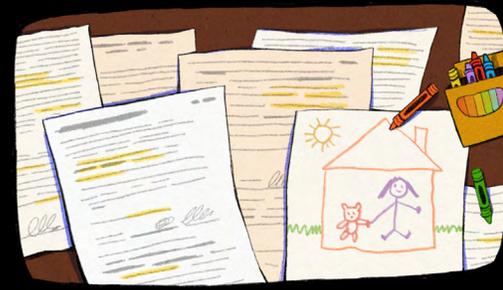


To help Evelyn stay in the US, GHIRP assisted Evelyn in filing her asylum application



They are currently in the process of helping her apply for a visa for victims of human trafficking

This was made possible by the Unaccompanied Children Program



They provide legal representation and services to Kids who arrive in the US without a parent or legal guardian

This program ensures that Kids have an attorney by their side in court, so they don't have to face this battle alone



In 2025, Acacia launched a new project, Artists for Immigrants, to share sensitive client stories safely through illustration.

This first comic in the series was a collaboration between the Acacia Center for Justice and artist [Somewhere in June](#) to illustrate the story of a young girl represented by our partner, Galveston-Houston Immigrant Representation Project (GHIRP).



Legal Access Services for Reunified Families Program (LASRF)

The Legal Access Services for Reunified Families Program (LASRF) provides legal services and defense to families who were separated during the first Trump administration, under the “zero-tolerance” family separation policy.

In April 2025, the Department of Justice announced that it would discontinue LASRF, placing hundreds of families at risk of deportation and re-traumatization. The court found this violated the [Ms. L Settlement Agreement](#), which requires the government to provide basic legal access and information to formerly separated families.

The ACLU took the administration back to court, and a federal judge ordered the reinstatement of LASRF. Services resumed, and we will continue fighting to protect family unity and safety.

During LASRF’s disruption, and in the wake of a new wave of family separations, Acacia launched the Family Reunification Project (see page 10 to learn more).

“I was traumatized by the experience of being separated from my son and locked up in detention...I still think about how the U.S. government could separate my son from me again even today.”

— Ms. L Class Member



Children's Holistic Immigration Representation Project (CHIRP)

Since 2022, the Children's Holistic Immigration Representation Project (CHIRP) has supported the wellbeing of unaccompanied children in California, pairing them with an integrated social services and legal support team as they navigate their immigration case. But in 2024, the future of the program's funding became uncertain.

After many months of advocacy, Acacia worked closely with partners and the champions in California's Assembly and Senate to ensure unaccompanied children were not forgotten during California state budget negotiations. Acacia secured a \$10M investment for CHIRP for the State's Fiscal Year 2025-2026. This investment represents an increase of ~\$1.4M from last year's CHIRP program funding and is a win in the context of a contentious and lean budget season. Partners brought current and former clients to Sacramento to share their stories with state legislators.

As children increasingly become targets of punitive immigration policy, we will continue fighting to protect their safety, dignity, and futures.

900
youth clients
served



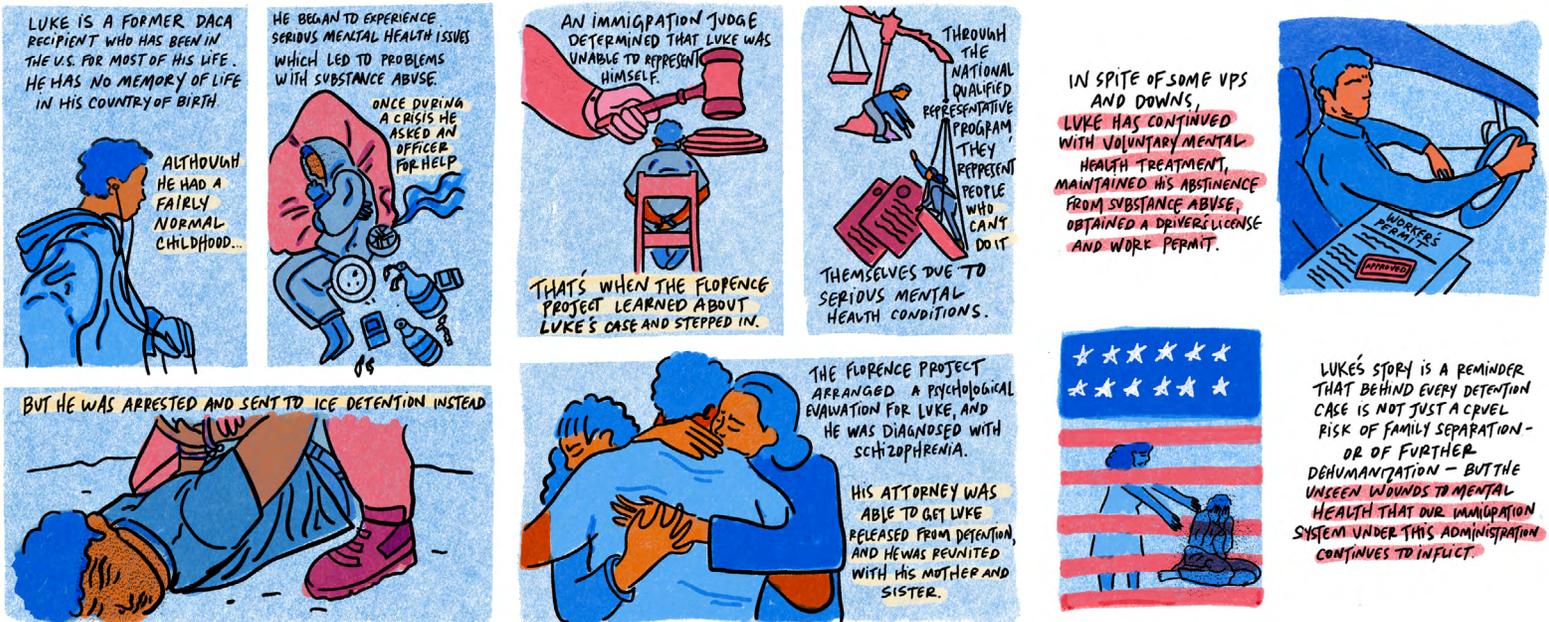
National Qualified Representative Program (NQRP)

The National Qualified Representative Program (NQRP) is a critical safeguard for people in detention with intellectual disabilities or significant mental health conditions who, according to an immigration judge, cannot represent themselves in court.

In April 2025, the Department of Justice terminated funding for NQRP in all but three states. This resulted in serious due process violations and irreparable harm, including prolonged detention of people with cognitive disabilities, advanced dementia and severe mental health disabilities and the deportation of people who are unable to advocate for themselves.

A court order has temporarily restored NQRP, and litigation is ongoing. Access to legal representation ensures that vulnerable people are reunited with their communities instead of languishing in inhumane detention facilities.

approximately
1200
clients served



Illustrations by Natalie Bui, in collaboration with Florence Project



Meeting the Moment with Innovative Initiatives

We are living through a pivotal era for due process and access to justice in the United States, with immigrant community members and those suspected of being immigrants made more vulnerable by policy changes and arbitrary actions. Across the country, families are being separated, cherished constitutional rights are under siege, and legal defenders are working to hold the line. In these moments of crisis, Acacia strives to be a stabilizing force: coordinating, connecting, and fueling the infrastructure that ensures no one faces an uncertain future alone.

Family Reunification Project

In addition to the separated families who have yet to be reunified from the first Trump administration, we saw a new wave of family separations in 2025. In response, Acacia launched the Family Reunification Project in 2025 to leverage available resources and existing networks to track reports of separations and support separated families. The project has begun identifying cases of family separation, mobilizing resources to locate missing loved ones, and connecting affected individuals with legal representation or orientation services, such as Know Your Rights presentations.

While the separations during the first Trump Administration took place at the southwest border, the new separations have occurred across the country and impacted a wide range of nationalities.

Witness for Justice

In September 2025, we launched [Witness for Justice](#), a volunteer-powered initiative that trains people across the country to observe immigration court proceedings and report on what they see. Our goal is to restore visibility and accountability to a system designed to operate in the shadows — and to ensure no one faces immigration court alone or unseen.

Since the official launch, volunteers have shown extraordinary dedication to this mission. Individuals stepped into service, bringing urgency, compassion, and consistency to a system that far too often operates behind closed doors.

Witness for Justice partners with other court observation projects with the goal of strengthening our collective impact and avoiding duplication of efforts. Some of our strongest partners in this work include Advocates for Human Rights (Minneapolis, MN); The American Bar Association (Washington, D.C.), I-ARC (NY, NY), and NorCal Resist (Sacramento, CA). All of these organizations have substantial experience in volunteer court watch efforts, and they have been invaluable to the success of Witness for Justice.

1000
volunteers registered

512
court observation
forms submitted

In December 2025, Witness for Justice held its first in-person storytelling event in Sacramento. The event featured four storytellers including an attorney, a court watch volunteer, a California Assemblymember, and a former immigration judge.



Throughout the year and across the country, various judges and courts have systematically shut observers out of hearings for reasons unsupported by federal regulations governing public access. Advocacy around public access continues to be a priority for 2026.

Despite these barriers, our volunteers continued to show up with courage, compassion, and persistence. This year, volunteers shared powerful stories from inside and outside courtrooms. One highlight comes from Yasmin Madraswala, in New York City:

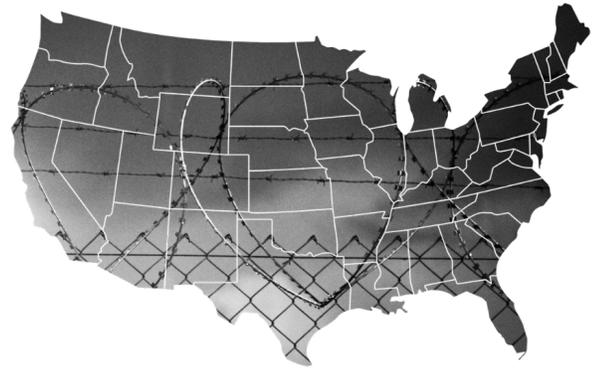
“For the past few months, I’ve been volunteering inside NYC’s immigration courts: accompanying immigrants to hearings, taking notes, and gathering emergency contacts in case they’re suddenly detained by ICE. I’ve seen parents separated from their children and people detained on the spot. It can be heartbreaking, but there are moments of real hope.

“Recently, I volunteered as a virtual court observer for a permanent resident who was the sole caregiver to his son who required specialized medical care. Despite this, ICE had detained him. When I joined his virtual hearing, the waiting room kept filling – ten people, then fifty, then a hundred. Ultimately, 150 observers showed up. There were so many of us that the court couldn’t even let everyone in. The judge said he had never seen that level of support. While the man’s legal team presented strong evidence, the overwhelming presence of so many observers mattered. The judge cancelled his deportation and told him to go home to reunite with his son. It reminded me how powerful a community of strangers can be and why I’ll keep showing up.”

In 2026, we are poised to deepen volunteer engagement by solidifying the foundations of our court watch program while expanding additional pathways for participation. Our commitment is simple: nothing that happens in immigration court should happen in the dark. Justice must be visible – in courtrooms, communities, and regions nationwide.

National Immigrant Legal Responders Alliance (NILRA)

In 2025, Acacia launched the National Immigrant Legal Responders Alliance (NILRA) in partnership with a large swath of the immigrant legal services community as a strategic national response to an anticipated escalation of arrests, detention, and deportation. NILRA aims to maximize legal capacity and improve coordination across the country.



In its first year, NILRA distributed \$1.7 million to support detention-based defense, pro bono coordination, and national infrastructure. These investments directly expanded access to legal representation for people facing detention and deportation: many held in remote facilities far from family, counsel, and community support. NILRA's collaborative supports not only direct legal services, but also the relationships and knowledge-sharing necessary to sustain a national legal defense ecosystem.

NILRA also made targeted investments in systems to expand the pro bono defense bench and improve access to counsel in detention. Through the Pro Bono Mentorship & Technical Assistance initiative, Human Rights First and the Amica Center for Immigrant Rights were selected to provide mentorship and technical assistance on approximately 100 detained cases annually.

Wins:



\$1.7 million distributed in NILRA's first year to support detention-based defense, pro bono coordination, and national infrastructure



100+ partner organizations engaged nationwide



100 detained cases supported in 2026 through Pro Bono Mentorship & Technical Assistance



4,600+ advocates trained across NILRA trainings in 2025

New Resources:



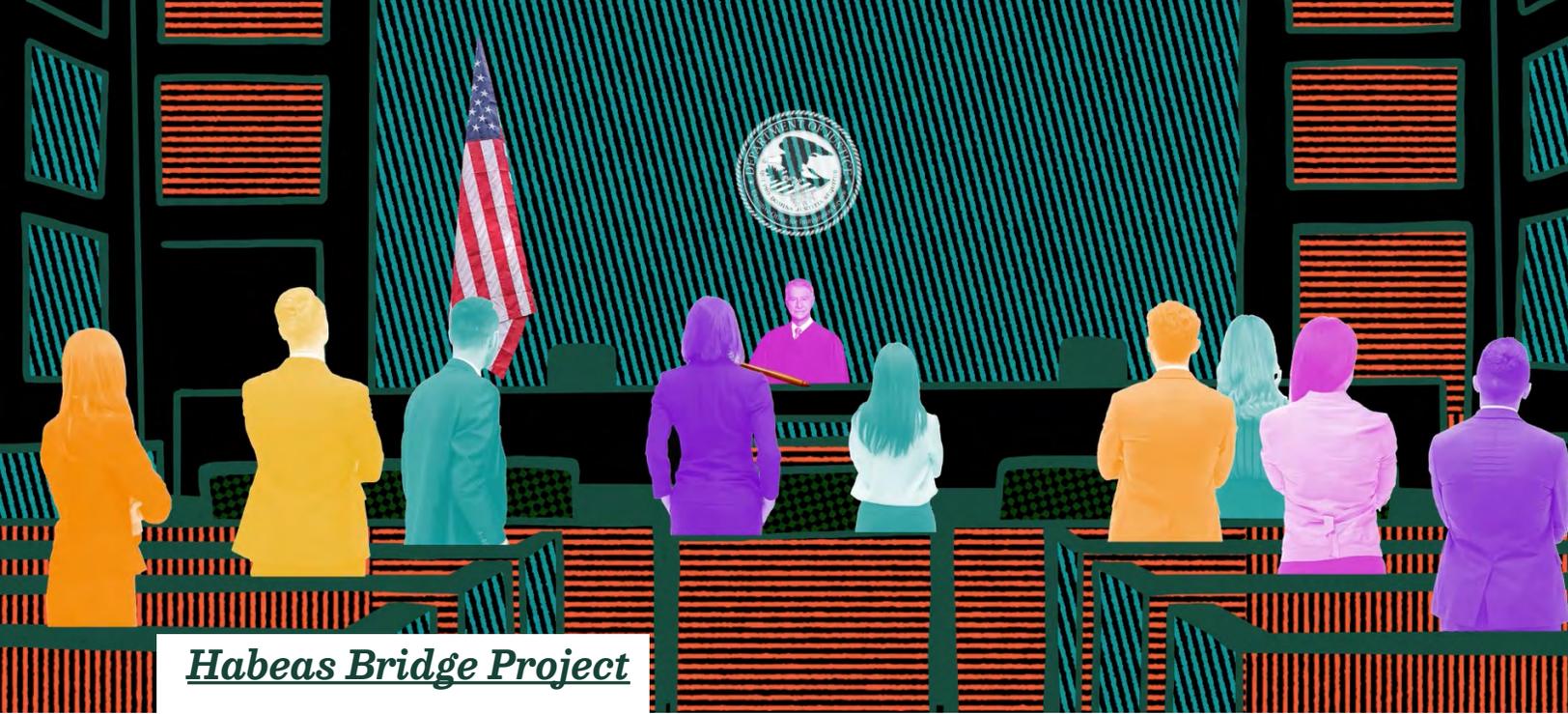
Immigration detention mapping: providing real-time insights into evolving detention trends, transfer patterns, and legal access gaps



NILRA Referral Database: a secure national platform designed to streamline legal referrals for people in immigration detention



NILRA Resource Library: a centralized, practitioner-facing repository of vetted materials



Habeas Bridge Project

In response to the sharp rise in unlawful immigration detention and the increasing need to seek habeas relief in federal district court, Acacia launched the Habeas Bridge Project, a targeted capacity building effort to equip immigration attorneys with the skills and confidence to litigate habeas petitions.

Habeas, meaning “show the body,” is a Constitutional protection that allows individuals to challenge their unlawful detention in federal court. As our community members are being increasingly detained and denied an opportunity to be released on bond, immigration attorneys have turned to filing habeas petitions to secure their clients’ release.

Given that many immigration attorneys lack experience in federal court, the project focuses on hands-on training, mentorship, and technical assistance to expand the legal field’s ability to challenge unlawful detention.

The project launched its first Habeas Mentor Cohort, consisting of attorneys from three Southern California organizations – Immigrant Defenders, Al Atro Lado, and Esperanza. These attorneys have been actively filing habeas petitions with mentoring and support from NILRA. Through this mentored-learning model, cohort members are developing the expertise needed to independently litigate future habeas cases. This model will be replicated across Southern California to further increase local capacity, and we hope to expand to other regions in 2026.



Acacia in Action

The year was defined by a systematic and intentional erosion of due process for people going through immigration court proceedings, spreading fear and uncertainty for families and attorneys alike.

Through it all, Acacia has been at the forefront of these attacks, sounding the alarm on abuses and rallying the public to support immigrant communities.

Advocating with Policymakers to Affect Change

Amid the volatility of 2025, the federal policy team remained active on Capitol Hill to share immigration policy expertise, advocate for legal access, and expose due process violations.

Acacia's expertise in these areas has provided important insight to policy makers. For instance, Senator Alex Padilla cited Acacia's analysis of public data and visualizations during a congressional hearing, elevating prolonged child detention into the national spotlight.

The team also organized high-impact briefings and provided testimony to the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Trafficking in Persons regarding conditions in the United States. Even in a deeply polarized climate, Acacia ensured that the erosion of due process did not go unchallenged.

Building Knowledge and Seeding the Field with Resources

Acacia's new Public Education Team advanced due process and defense capacity by creating actionable guidance, training, and field-ready resources to meet an increasingly volatile legal atmosphere.



Acacia strengthened practitioner and community protection through materials on ICE interactions in court, courthouse arrest guidance, federal harboring statute education planning, and targeted practice advisories like the [Guide to Legal Access in Immigration Detention](#) and [strategies supporting pregnant or nursing removal defense attorneys](#), a resource to protect the health and family well-being of young and expectant parents appearing in court and visiting clients in detention.

Through NILRA's Resource Library and the public-facing [Practitioner Hub](#), practitioners across jurisdictions — including under-resourced and rural regions — can quickly find ready-to-use materials that strengthened litigation.

4000
views on *Practitioner Hub* in 3 months

“José” told an immigration judge he was bleeding daily and not receiving adequate treatment in detention, even bringing a jar of blood to court as proof while pleading that he was “dying little by little,” as reported by [Capital & Main](#). Acacia worked alongside advocates and partners to connect “José” to pro bono counsel and urgent medical care: an example of how our partnerships translate into life-saving intervention.



Strategies for Lactating Parents:
A Removal Defense Advocate's Guide

Analyzing Data, Mapping Trends

In 2025, Acacia's Research Evaluation and Data Analytics (REDA) team worked to provide effective program monitoring and quality reporting for our publicly funded work, as well as release public-facing materials to establish Acacia's reputation as a trusted expert in the immigration field.



REDA staff completed the build for the National Immigrant Legal Responders Alliance (NILRA) database, which is being used to facilitate pro bono attorney referrals and coordination of case transfers between legal service providers for immigrants who are in need of legal support. The team also developed and began publishing a [monthly report analyzing and mapping ICE detention](#) across the country. Significant progress was also made developing critical analyses of ICE arrests, detentions, transfers between facilities, and removals utilizing a series of granular ICE datasets obtained by a partner via Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests.

The team also released a number of public facing reports about current issues in immigrant legal access, with an emphasis on the legal and holistic service needs of unaccompanied children. A few examples include a report on [significant increases in the length of time that unaccompanied children are being held in government custody](#), an article (published in the Journal of Migration and Human Security) that traced [geographic disparities in legal supports for unaccompanied children](#), a report that [explained why holistic representation is a value-add both for immigrant children and the providers who serve them](#), an inaugural explainer that tracked the [relationship between Immigration Judge staffing levels and asylum decisions](#), and an analysis of [contrasting methods for assessing the cost-efficiency of legal access programs](#).

Many of these public facing achievements benefited from the guidance of Acacia's [Academic Advisory Board](#), launched in 2025. The Advisory Board members are leaders in their respective fields, representing a diverse range of specializations and expertise, including constitutional and immigration law, child development, and the intersection of the immigration and criminal legal systems.



Harnessing Collective Resource Mobilization for the Field

In 2025, our community grew to nearly 12,000 supporters across the country, demonstrating increasing momentum behind our mission to expand access to justice for immigrants navigating a complex legal system. A dedicated group of more than 300 recurring donors sustained our work through ongoing support, while funder briefings throughout the year created meaningful opportunities to deepen partnership with philanthropic supporters. Through a series of mission-driven campaigns, we engaged supporters nationwide in advancing awareness, due process protections, and community support for immigrants and the legal service providers who stand alongside them.



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