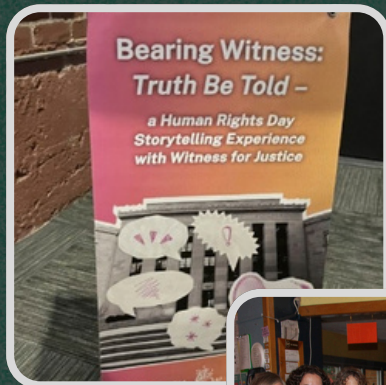


Witness for Justice

2026 Annual Report



A Year of Court Observation, Advocacy, and Impact



October 2026

INTRODUCTION

Witness for Justice (W4J) is building a volunteer-powered movement to:

- Observe immigration court proceedings and document due process violations
- Promote public accountability and transparency in immigration courts
- Raise awareness about the lack of judicial independence in immigration decisions
- Amplify the voices and stories of court observers to bring visibility and strength to these critical issues

We aim to strengthen -not duplicate- existing efforts. By collaborating with partners already doing this work, we're helping to connect the dots and fill the gaps, building toward a more unified and powerful national movement for immigrant justice.

From September 2025 - September 2026, W4J grew into a nationwide volunteer network, engaging more than 400 volunteers across 39 states and covering more than 500 court dockets. Volunteers submitted more than 2,600 observation reports documenting what is happening in immigration courts. During our first year, W4J expanded specialized observation efforts focused on children and detained adults, built partnerships with other observation groups, created new training and volunteer-support resources, and brought volunteers together through StoryLabs, decompression sessions, and live storytelling events.

This annual report provides an overview of our major accomplishments and significant milestones over the past year, including:

- the expansion of our volunteer cohorts
- new state, regional and national partnerships
- diverse testimonials from volunteers across the country

Our volunteers have seen firsthand, the need for increased public attention on immigration courts. As we look to the future, we will continue bringing greater visibility to what happens every day in immigration courts, elevating the experiences of those who witness it firsthand, and building momentum for greater transparency, accountability, and justice.



W4J AT A GLANCE

SEPT 2025 – SEPT 2026

968

Total Volunteers on the VOMO
platform as of 9/2026



404

Total Volunteer Engaged as
of 9/2026



39

Total States Represented



534

Total dockets covered across
kid's dockets, LAdockets, and
in person observations.



118

Total Volunteers Covering
Kids Dockets



2,679

Total Observation Reports
Submitted



It is **my right to observe**...I'm happy to be sitting and watching and listening and **maybe even to disrupt the system by the act of observing it**....We need your help. **We need your eyes. We need your voices.** No matter how many languages you do or don't speak.

11

Total Decompression
Sessions Held



Thank you to every
volunteer who helped
document and elevate what
is happening in immigration
courts across the country.

5

Total Storylabs Held in
partnership with orgs in AZ,
MN, NM, TX, and virtually



VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCES



DOANN The Power of Simply Showing Up

Houston-based observer Doann Nguyen shared how court observation **transformed her understanding of immigration court and showed that observing can influence courtroom culture**. For instance, Doann noticed one judge who was more thorough with the advisals he provided when he realized observers were present.



JOY One Child's Life, One Family's Fight

Joy Olson observed the case of 12-year-old "Carlos" for weeks while he was held in government custody. Carlos' father tried to reunify with Carlos, but he was detained and deported in the process. Carlos' aunt wanted to sponsor him, but challenges like shelter closures and administrative delays complicated the process. **Joy described the uncertainty and urgency and was relieved when Carlos was released to his aunt just before a critical hearing.**



ADAM Bringing Court Realities to Public Attention

Observer Adam Graham-Silverman was featured in a Seattle Times investigation about the rise of "Mega Master" hearings. He shared how the judge ordered a man deported in absentia, even though he was present and waiting for his hearing in a virtual waiting room. Adam's engagement with the media shows how **observers can help the public better understand court operations and document due process issues that might otherwise go unnoticed.**



EMILY Documents the Loss of Counsel for Children

Volunteer Emily shared an Instagram video describing a dramatic change she witnessed. She compared a recent court session to one she attended weeks earlier. She noted, **"There is a giant difference from today than there was from last month when I was also observing the children's docket and that is that no child had legal representation today."**

VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCES



SARA **From Observer to** **Public Advocate**

Volunteer Sara transformed what she witnessed into public advocacy through a letter to the editor in the Chicago Tribune. She wrote, "**The firing of seasoned immigration judges means the suffering of immigrant children in U.S. courts will only continue.**" Sara was empowered to engage in civic dialogue and raise awareness about due process issues in immigration court.



JILL F. **The Human Cost** **of Detention**

Jill shared a detained father's case in Louisiana. He had four U.S.-citizen children but was so discouraged by prolonged detention that he wanted to self-deport. The judge granted bond and Jill stated, "**[This] judge was all that was standing between this man and an unnecessary, life-changing deportation.**" This shows the toll of detention and how critical fair hearings are in case outcomes.



YASMIN **The Power of** **Community** **Support**

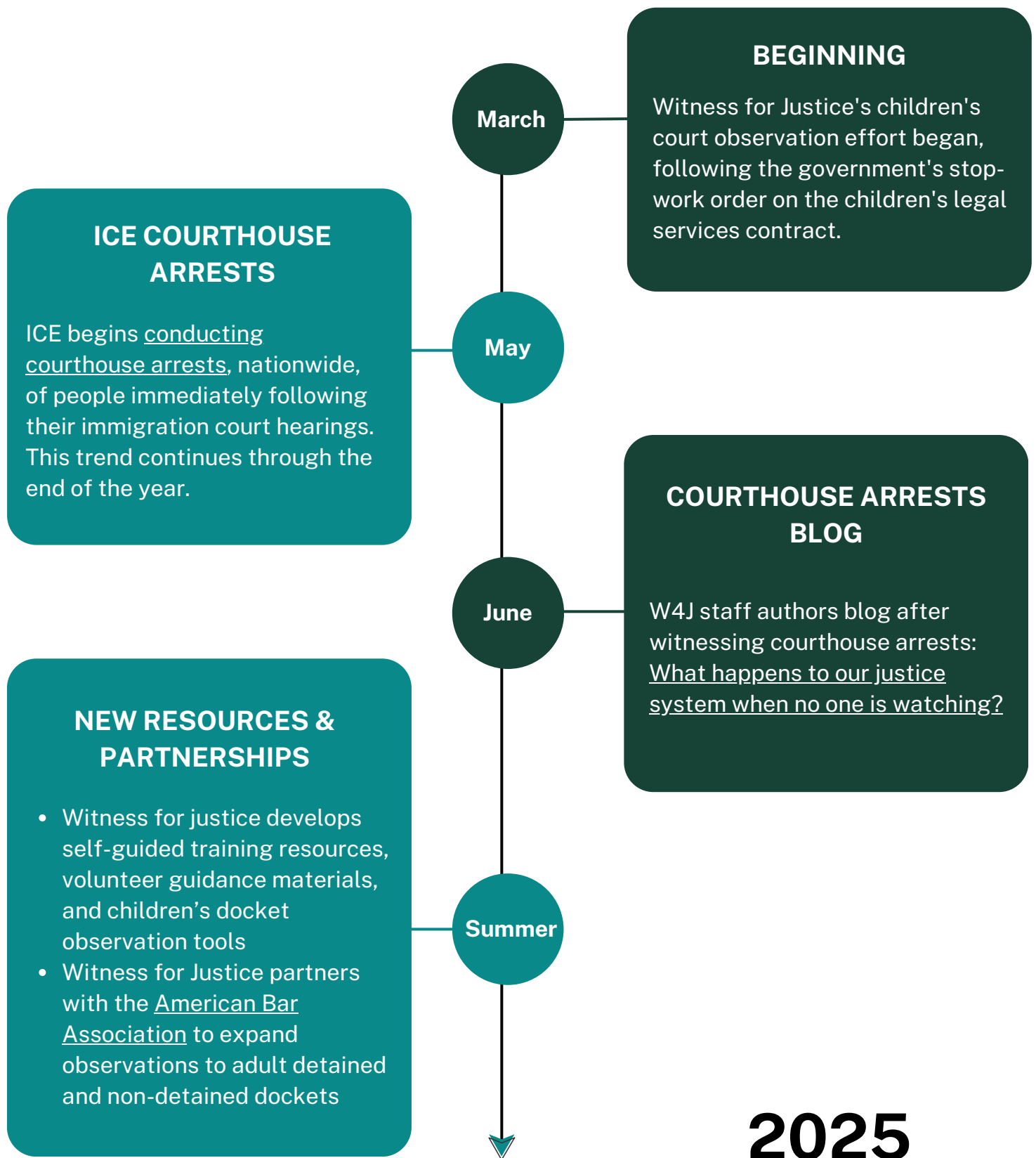
Yasmin observed a lawful permanent resident's hearing who was the sole caregiver of a child with significant medical needs. More than 150 observers joined the virtual hearing, and "**the judge said he had never seen that level of support.**" The father was allowed to stay with his child, and this story "reminded [Yasmin] how powerful a community of strangers can be and why I'll keep showing up."



ROSELLE **Policies Impact** **Safety and Family** **Unity**

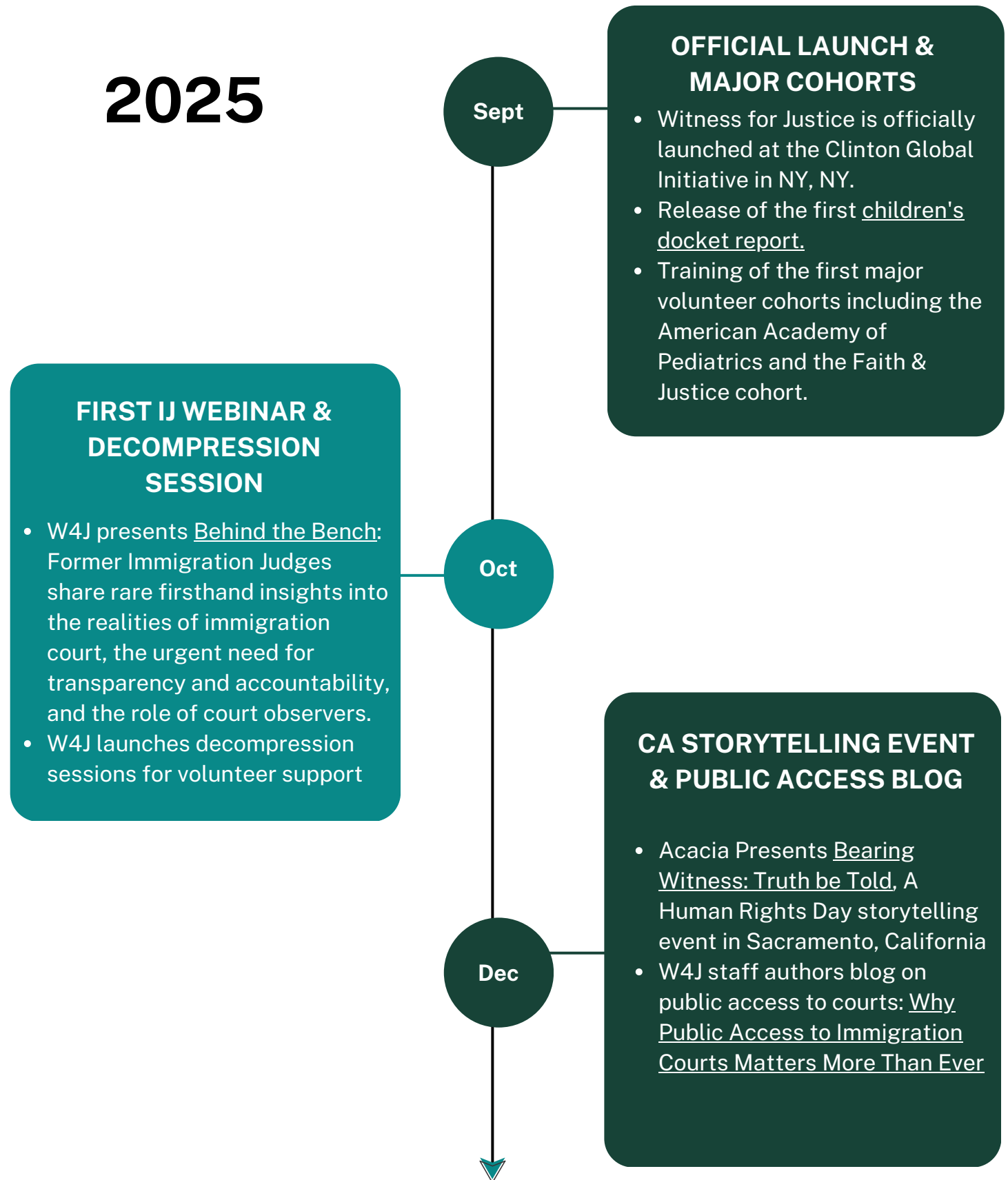
Roselle documented cases where individuals are deported to countries where they have no family connections, support networks, or meaningful ties. She illuminates the real-world implications of legal policies on asylum seekers and other vulnerable populations. These cases raises **difficult questions about who has access to safety, family unity, and protection.**

PROJECT TIMELINE & MILESTONES 2025

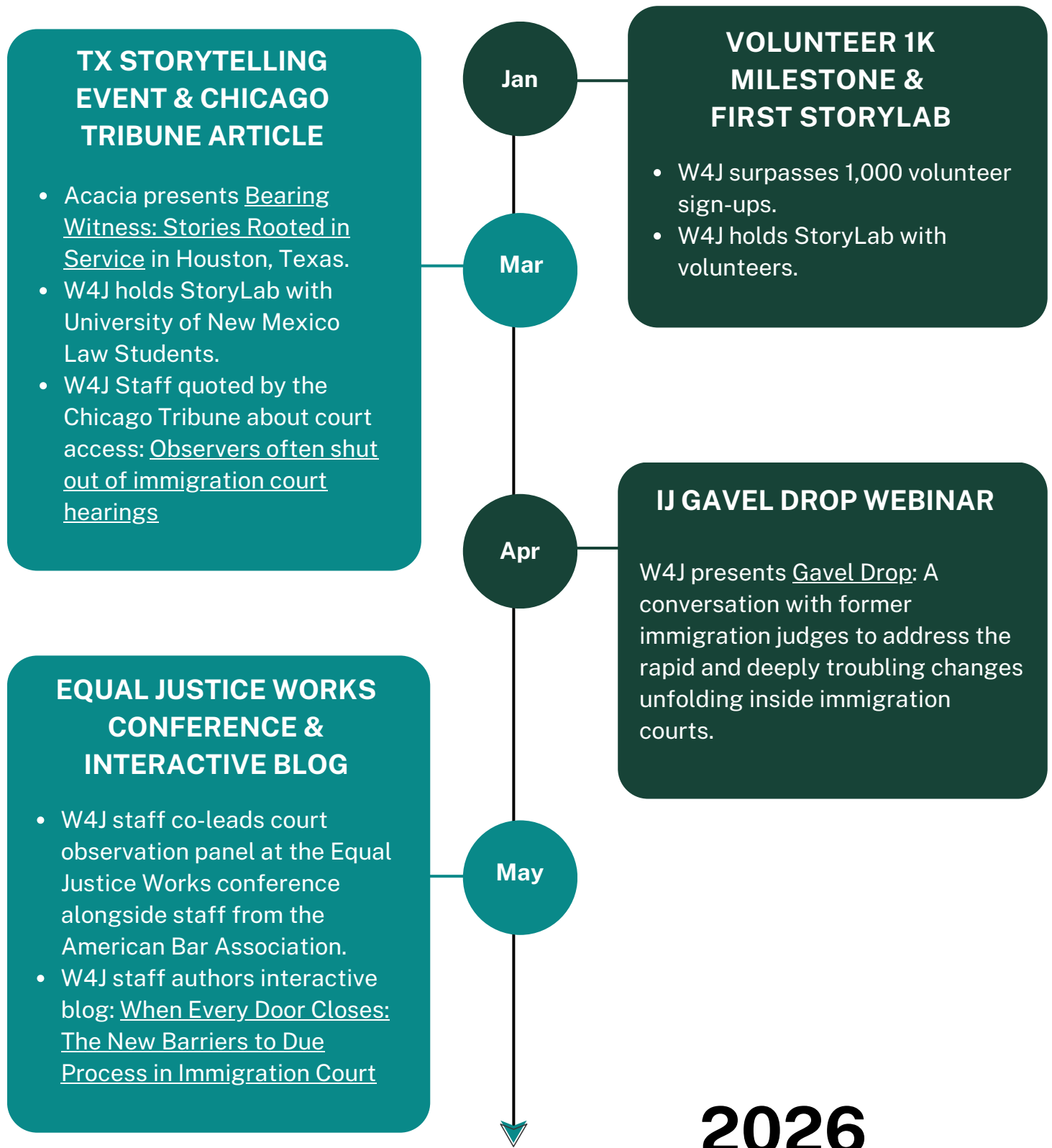


PROJECT TIMELINE & MILESTONES 2025

2025

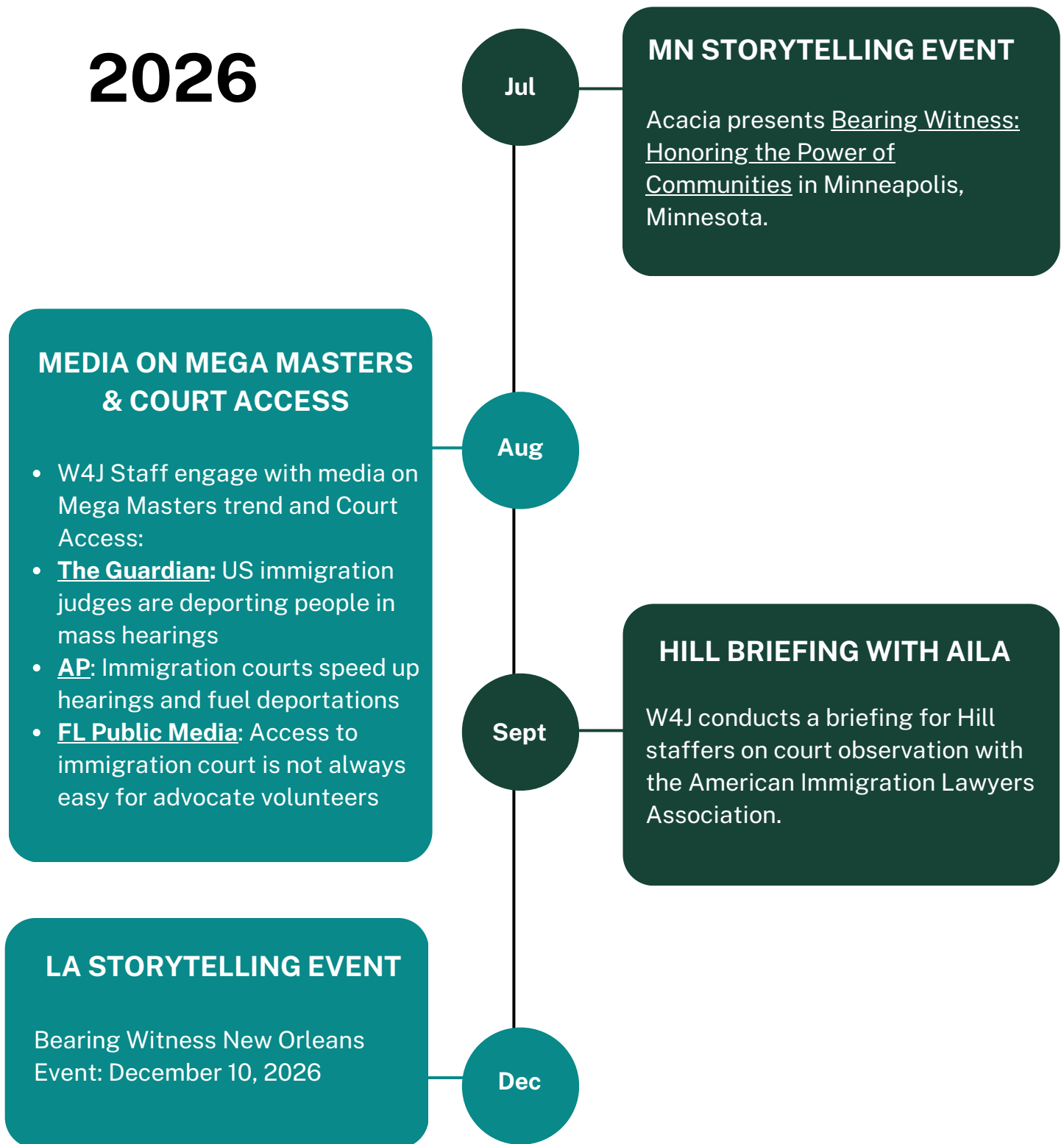


PROJECT TIMELINE & MILESTONES 2026



PROJECT TIMELINE & MILESTONES 2026

2026





Witness for Justice



Join Us!



Questions?

W4J@acaciajustice.org

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PROJECT TIMELINE & MILESTONES '25 - '26

2025



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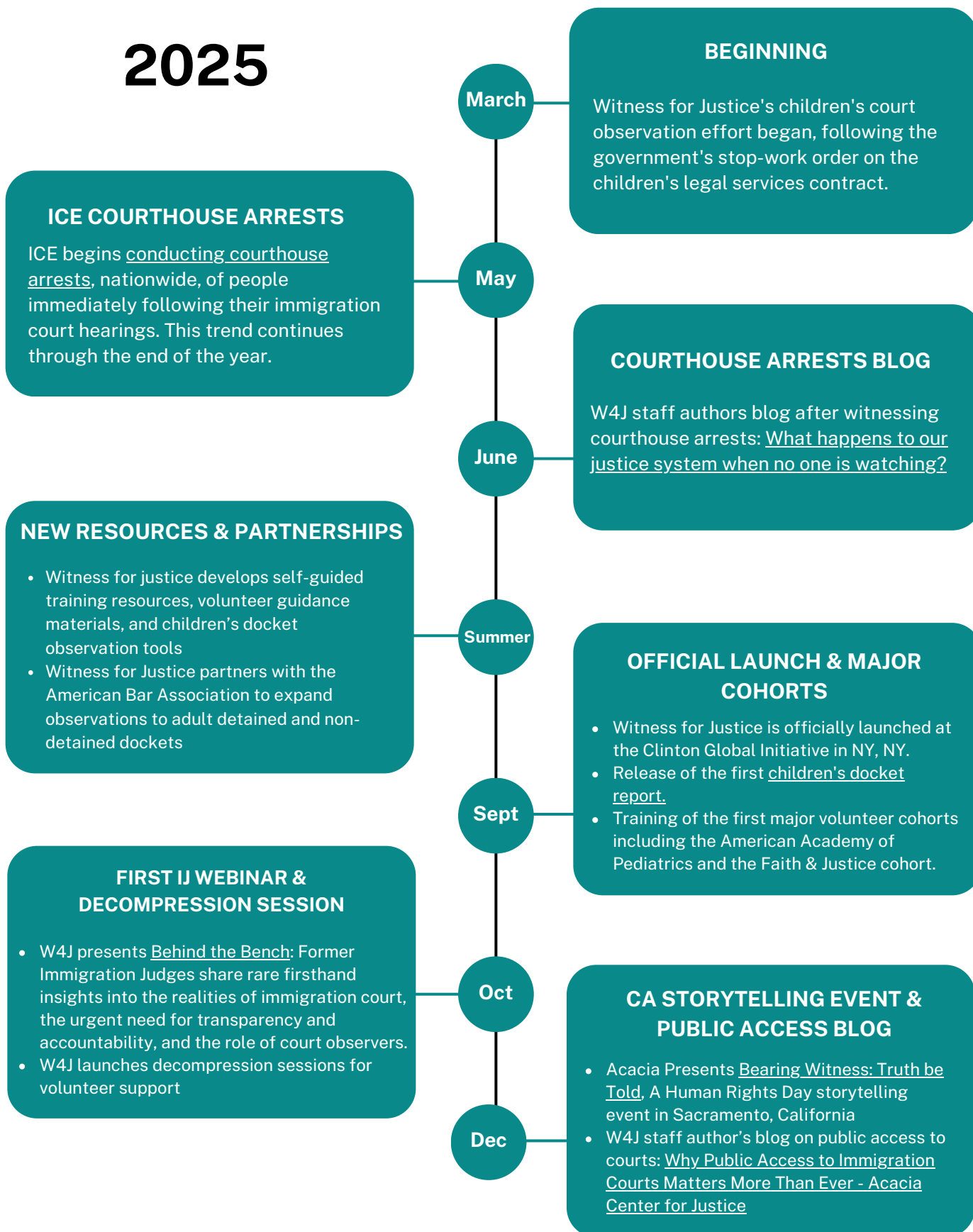


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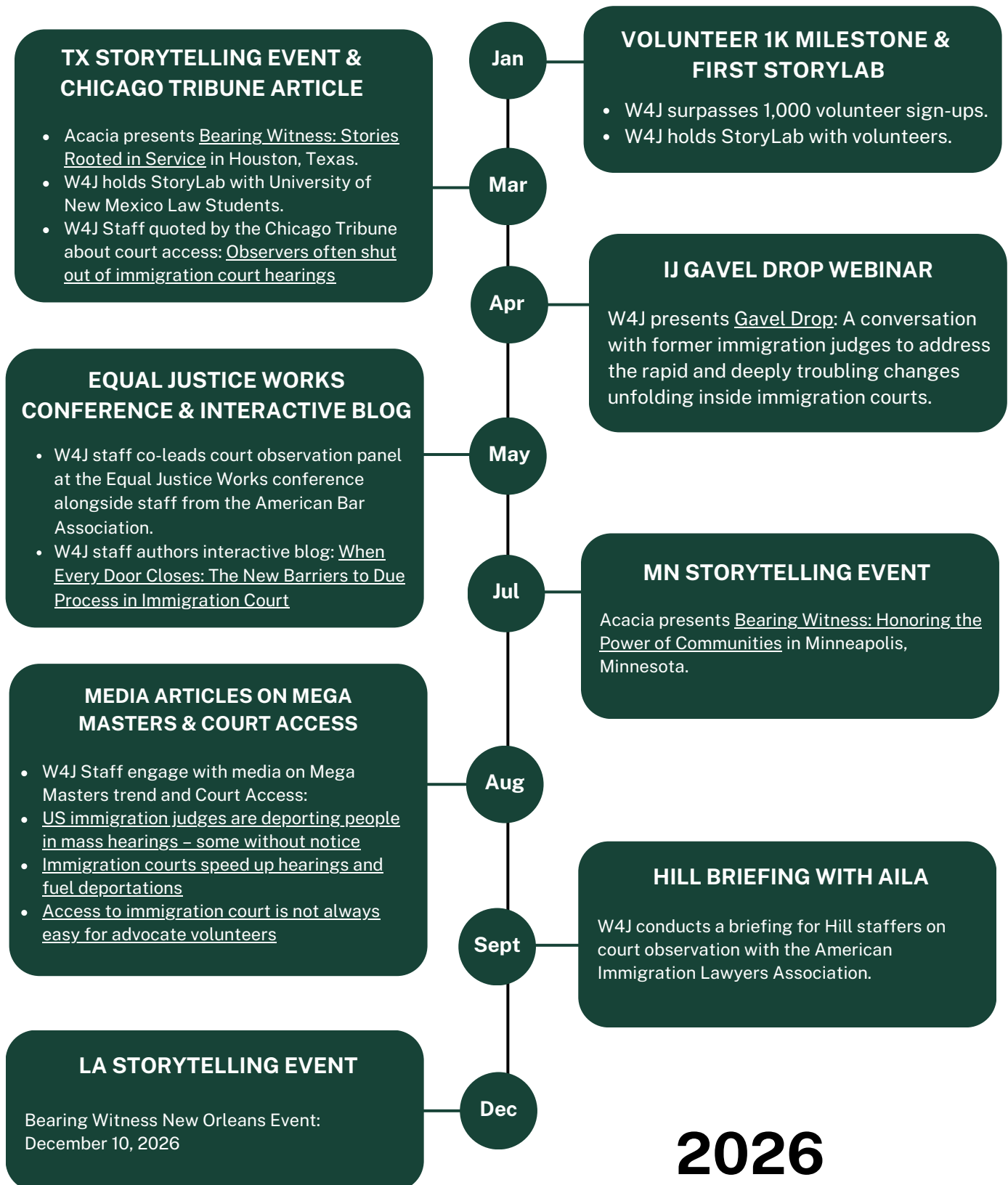
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PROJECT TIMELINE & MILESTONES '25 - '26

2025



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PROJECT TIMELINE & MILESTONES '25 - '26

2025

March

Beginning

Witness for Justice's children's court observation effort began, following the government's stop-work order on the children's legal services contract.

May

ICE Courthouse Arrests

ICE begins conducting courthouse arrests, nationwide, of people immediately following their immigration court hearings. This trend continues through the end of the year.

June

Courthouse Arrests Blog

W4J staff authors blog after witnessing courthouse arrests: What happens to our justice system when no one is watching?

Oct.

First IJ Webinar & Decompression Session

- W4J presents Behind the Bench: Former Immigration Judges share rare firsthand insights into the realities of immigration court, the urgent need for transparency and accountability, and the role of court observers.
- W4J launches decompression sessions for volunteer support

Sept.

Official Launch & Major Cohorts

- Witness for Justice is officially launched at the Clinton Global Initiative in NY, NY.
- Release of the first children's docket report.
- Training of the first major volunteer cohorts including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Faith & Justice cohort.

Summer

New Resources & Partnerships

- Witness for justice develops self-guided training resources, volunteer guidance materials, and children's docket observation tools
- Witness for Justice partners with the American Bar Association to expand observations to adult detained and non-detained dockets

Dec.

CA Storytelling Event & Public Access Blog

- Acacia Presents Bearing Witness: Truth be Told. A Human Rights Day storytelling event in Sacramento, California
- W4J staff author's blog on public access to courts: Why Public Access to Immigration Courts Matters More Than Ever - Acacia Center for Justice

Jan.

Volunteer 1K Milestone & First StoryLab

- W4J surpasses 1,000 volunteer sign-ups.
- W4J holds StoryLab with volunteers.

March

TX Storytelling Event & Chicago Tribune Article

- Acacia presents Bearing Witness: Stories Rooted in Service in Houston, Texas.
- W4J holds StoryLab with University of New Mexico Law Students.
- W4J Staff quoted by the Chicago Tribune about court access: Observers often shut out of immigration court hearings

2026

July

MN Storytelling Event

Acacia presents Bearing Witness: Honoring the Power of Communities in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

May

Equal Justice Works Conference & Interactive Blog

- W4J staff co-leads court observation panel at the Equal Justice Works conference alongside staff from the American Bar Association.
- W4J staff authors interactive blog: When Every Door Closes: The New Barriers to Due Process in Immigration Court

April

IJ Gavel Drop Webinar

W4J presents Gavel Drop: A conversation with former immigration judges to address the rapid and deeply troubling changes unfolding inside immigration courts.

August

Media Articles on Mega Masters & Court Access

- W4J Staff engage with media on Mega Masters trend and Court Access:
- US immigration judges are deporting people in mass hearings - some without notice
 - Immigration courts speed up hearings and fuel deportations
 - Access to immigration court is not always easy for advocate volunteers

Sept.

Hill Briefing with AILA

- W4J conducts a briefing for Hill staffers on court observation with the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

Dec.

LA Storytelling Event

Bearing Witness New Orleans Event: December 10, 2026

VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCES

The most obvious factor affecting children's access to representation is the undersupply of attorneys in relation to unaccompanied children. There is only one free or low-cost immigration attorney for an estimated 137 children in need of representation nationally (Williams and Gosch 2025)¹. In 43 out of 50 states, the attorney to child ratio exceeds what legal service providers consider a reasonable caseload of 35 children. The lack of attorneys is particularly severe in the southeastern region of the country where, in several states, there would need to be an eightfold increase in attorneys to sufficiently represent the children released in those locations. Universal and geographically targeted attorney recruitment efforts are critical for increasing access to representation. Recruitment efforts should be cognizant of current attorney workforce dynamics in which demand is greater than supply, and non-profit public interest organizations compete with private firms able to offer much higher salaries. Dedicated recruitment staff and thoughtful strategies are necessary for supporting the broad recruitment activities needed to attract high-quality candidates in this market. Moreover, recruitment efforts should begin long before a law school graduation with paid internship or fellowship programs serving as a way to cultivate and sustain interest in the field over time. Loan repayment and relocation support can further help to entice law school graduates into positions and high-needs locations that may otherwise be out of reach. Legal field transition programs that aim to support seasoned attorneys moving from other fields into positions serving unaccompanied children can further serve to broaden the potential pool of applicants beyond new law school graduates.

TRAINING, MENTORSHIP, AND SUPERVISION

Recruitment efforts must be coupled with dedicated training, mentorship, and responsive supervision to ensure that attorneys new to the field can provide high-quality services and gain the skills necessary to persist in positions prone to vicarious trauma and burnout. Cohorted training and mentorship programs, such as fellowships and internships, enable attorneys to build peer communities that both support retention and aid in professional development. These programs can also reduce organizational burden by outsourcing preliminary field-specific training for new hires, allowing teams to focus on more role-specific mentorship. In parallel, retaining and training mid-career attorneys is foundational to developing an internal pipeline of supervisors, which is a requirement to effectively expand staffing at more junior levels.

NON-ATTORNEY STAFF & RESOURCES

Effectively and efficiently providing legal services to unaccompanied children requires staffing and resources beyond attorneys. Accredited representatives, paralegals, and legal assistants are key members of legal teams whose support can increase capacity to serve more children by providing needed support to attorneys. Within the context of unaccompanied children's legal services, social services staff are additionally important parts of the legal team as they are able to ensure children have access to needed services and resources, freeing up attorney and legal staff time to focus on legal matters. Within the context of government and philanthropically funded legal service delivery models, robust reporting requirements further require dedicated data entry staffing support to ensure compliance. Sustainable and effective capacity building therefore requires attention to staffing beyond just attorneys.

ORGANIZATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE & PRACTICES

Capacity building efforts that focus on staffing alone fail to recognize the material infrastructure and practices that make the work possible. For example, office space, computers, case management systems, and human resources software are all necessary for enabling organizations to effectively function and serve unaccompanied children. Investment in human infrastructure, like leadership and skills-building, is also critical to growth. Beyond infrastructure, organizations can establish caseload and workload management practices that mitigate burnout and promote a culture of responsible trauma stewardship; these practices aid capacity building by supporting the workforce and reducing preventable turnover.



THE CAPACITY BUILDING ECOSYSTEM

