



Advocates for Basic  
Legal Equality, Inc.

## COLUMBUS FAMILIES TOGETHER FUND ANNUAL REPORT



**Columbus City Council established the Columbus Families Together Fund (CFTF) in 2017 to protect immigrant and refugee families from the financial and emotional devastation that results from aggressive immigration enforcement. CFTF provides funding to support legal education and representation for eligible immigrants in removal proceedings before the Cleveland Immigration Court.**

Advocates for Basic Legal Equality, Inc. (ABLE) is a non-profit law firm that provides high quality legal assistance in civil matters to help eligible low-income individuals and groups in Ohio achieve self-reliance, and equal justice and economic opportunity. Our work is made possible by the commitment of our funders, including Columbus City Council; Ohio Legal Assistance Foundation (OLAF); The Supreme Court of Ohio Civil Justice Program Fund; and the Vera Institute of Justice.

THE CITY OF  
**COLUMBUS**  
CITY COUNCIL

**Vera**  
INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

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**Advocates for Basic Legal Equality, Inc. (ABLE) is proud to partner with Columbus City Council and the Vera Institute of Justice in our collective effort to ensure the rights of all people to access justice while facing deportation. Before we separate families, before we tear apart communities, and before we deport community members who might face persecution or torture, we must respect the constitutional guarantee of due process. We know that providing legal information and representation makes a positive difference in community members' legal cases, their lives, and their community. We see the change in people's faces when we can provide representation; they regain their dignity because now they have an attorney to explain complex immigration proceedings to them. ABLE, the City of Columbus, and the Vera Institute of Justice are working together to make our communities strong, safe, and fair for everyone.**

We are living in times of tremendous suffering for immigrants, refugees, and many vulnerable populations. Hateful rhetoric and cruel policies have harmed so many of our neighbors, friends, classmates, and communities. Children all over the country, including in Ohio, have been ripped from the arms of their parents and separated for months. We know that children experience multiple problems when their parents are taken away, including depression, anxiety, acting out, sleeplessness, and poor school performance. The pain inflicted on immigrants and refugees will be long lasting.

There is a significant unmet need for representation and immigration advocacy for low-income immigrants in Ohio. As there is no guaranteed right to an attorney in immigration proceedings, those who cannot afford a lawyer usually face deportation unrepresented. In 2018, Ohio saw two very large workplace raids, and there are more than 10,000 removal cases pending before the Cleveland Immigration Court, which has jurisdiction over all of Ohio. Available data on representation rates across the state show nearly half of all immigrants in removal proceedings in Ohio are unrepresented; when detained, almost 90% are unrepresented. Meanwhile, studies demonstrate that those with counsel are ten times more likely to win their cases.

The majority of deportation cases in Ohio emanate from Columbus and Franklin County. Thus, the CFTF fills a clearly defined gap in services to the City's residents and their families. The CFTF provides immigrants with a chance to have their fair day in court with a lawyer, someone to educate and counsel them about immigration law and relief requirements, and answer their questions about the detention and removal process. The program helps to restore dignity, humanity, fairness, and justice in the immigration system.



The importance of CFTF funding was amply demonstrated in the summer of 2018, when ICE began detaining Mauritanian residents of Columbus at their routine ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) check-in appointments. Black Mauritanians had been previously permitted to stay in the United States despite having decade-old removal orders because the U.S. government recognized that, if deported, these individuals would likely face imprisonment, enslavement, and torture. With the assistance of CFTF funding, ABLE represented Mauritanians detained at the Butler and Morrow County Jails and advocated for their safety before the Board of Immigration Appeals and Circuit Courts of Appeals. In September 2018, ABLE held a meeting with Mauritanian leaders and community members to address the community members' risk of detention and deportation, assist them in formally requesting their immigration files, and help them identify possible pro bono legal counsel.

Through ABLE's partnership with the Our Lady of Guadalupe Center under the CFTF, ABLE provided advice and counsel on more than 50 cases through two community legal clinics in 2018. Each attendee also received an ABLE publication called "Preparing Your Family for Immigration Enforcement: Know Your Rights." The handbook includes details on individuals' Constitutional rights, a Limited Power of Attorney for childcare needs, and a family emergency planning guide - all aimed at empowering families to make critical decisions for themselves in advance, rather than being forced to make them during the stress of the worst-case scenario. With a grant from the Supreme Court of Ohio Civil Justice Program Fund, the handbook is now available in six languages: English, Spanish, Arabic, Swahili, Somali, and Mandarin.

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The CFTF positioned Columbus to be selected for participation in Vera’s SAFE Network, a diverse group of a dozen cities and counties across the United States dedicated to providing publicly-funded representation for people facing deportation. Vera supports the network by providing catalyst funding and technical assistance to government and legal services providers. Vera also builds evidence to demonstrate the impact of detention and representation on clients, their families, and the local community by collecting data on cases funded by Vera and the CFTF.

Over the year of funding, ABLÉ has **delivered legal information through 64 Legal Orientation Programs (LOPs) reaching a total of 501 individuals** detained at the Butler County Jail—a facility that previously offered no regular access to attorneys. These presentations are often the only opportunity for detained immigrants to obtain information about their rights and the immigration court process. Additionally, these presentations allow detainees access to speak directly with an attorney as well as give ABLÉ the platform to identify individuals for representation under the CFTF.

Through this joint CFTF and Vera funding, ABLÉ offered 27 individuals full representation. As part of their commitment to the goals of the CFTF, ABLÉ represented an additional 41 Columbus and Franklin County clients under their own organizational funding. **Columbus City Council’s initial investment through CFTF was leveraged to represent a total of 68 individuals.**<sup>1</sup>

Similar to the trend seen nationwide in the SAFE Network, the 27 clients represented under the SAFE Network in Columbus have had longstanding ties to the United States.<sup>2</sup> **On average, clients have lived in the United States for nine years**, with 30 percent of clients having resided in the country for 15 years or more. Many clients are parents, responsible for supporting themselves and their families, with **25 children under the age of 18 having a parent represented by SAFE in Columbus.**

After securing representation, one of the first priorities of detained clients is to seek release from detention. Release allows clients to fight their case from the community, free from the restrictions that make it so challenging to prepare a legal defense from detention, such as difficulty obtaining documents and other evidence from abroad.<sup>3</sup> Release further allows clients an opportunity to reunify with their children and other family members in their community, potentially alleviating the financial and emotional disruption associated with prolonged detention. To date, 25 percent of detained clients have been released on bond, parole, or were granted relief.<sup>4</sup>

Of the 27 cases represented by ABLÉ in the SAFE Network, four have already completed in immigration court (15 percent). To date, one client has been granted relief from deportation and three have returned to their countries of origin under an order of voluntary departure.<sup>5</sup> Given the small number of cases that have completed so far, it is too soon to draw meaningful conclusions from this very preliminary “success rate” of 25 percent. By comparison, unrepresented individuals who are detained typically win their case about three percent of the time. Regardless of the ultimate outcome of the case, the attorney’s presence is necessary to ensure due process for their client—justice that they would have otherwise been denied without competent counsel.

<b>UNAUDITED FUNDS SPENT:</b> <b>TOTAL:</b> <b>\$158,240</b> OUT OF <b>\$372,718 (42%)</b>	<b>COLUMBUS CITY COUNCIL:</b> <b>\$24,862</b> OUT OF <b>\$157,500</b>	<b>VERA INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE:</b> <b>\$100,000</b> OUT OF <b>\$100,000</b>	<b>ABLE MATCHING DOLLARS:</b> <b>\$33,378</b> OUT OF <b>\$115,218</b>
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<sup>1</sup> Vera analyzes only the portion of cases represented that are publicly funded or selected under a “merits-blind” or “universal representation” case selection model—that is, the only criteria for representation are residency and the inability to pay for a lawyer, without review of the likelihood of a “successful” outcome for the case. Though ABLÉ provided representation to 68 clients under funding from the CFTF, Vera, and ABLÉ’s matching dollars over the year of funding, the statistics below reflect the 27 cases ABLÉ represented under Vera and CFTF (“SAFE Network cases”). In addition to the individuals represented, ABLÉ screened 30 individuals who were not ultimately eligible for services.

<sup>2</sup> For nationwide statistics and success stories from the first year of the SAFE Network, see Nina Siulc and Karen Berberich, *A Year of Being SAFE* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2018), <https://www.vera.org/publications/a-year-of-being-safe>.

<sup>3</sup> Karen Berberich, Annie Chen, Corey Lazar, and Emily Tucker, *Advancing Universal Representation: The Case for Universal Representation* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, National Immigration Law Center, and Center for Popular Democracy, 2018), <https://www.vera.org/advancing-universal-representation-toolkit/the-case-for-universal-representation-1>.

<sup>4</sup> This release rate of 25 percent reflects initially detained clients facing removal proceedings under Section 240 of the Immigration and Nationality Act. ABLÉ has also represented seven detained, post-order clients (individuals who already received a deportation order) who are not included in the release rate because post-order individuals are not eligible for bond.

<sup>5</sup> Although voluntary departure results in the client’s departure from the United States, it is a more favorable outcome than receiving a removal order because it does not carry the same penalties and leaves opportunities for the client to more easily return to the United States lawfully in the future.



Carla came to the United States from El Salvador, fleeing persecution based on her political opinion and activity, and to reunite with her fiancé in Columbus. Carla was a member of a feminist political group in El Salvador, and there were attempts against her life because of her involvement. Unable to stay in El Salvador due to attempts against her life and the length of the immigration process, Carla traveled to the U.S. / Mexico border and applied for asylum. After ten months in detention in Texas, Carla met a SAFE Network attorney who was able to secure Carla's release on bond. Carla was then reunited with her fiancé, a Columbus resident and U.S. citizen.

**After arriving in Columbus, Carla and her fiancé married, and now ABLE represents the couple in the immigration family reunification process and Carla's removal proceedings.**



James and Camille are from Ghana and came to the United States nine years ago so that James could attend graduate school. After graduating with his Ph.D., James found work as a research fellow at a local university. At the time his work visa expired, Camille's sister, who also lived in Columbus, had just passed away, leaving behind four young children. Camille and James could not leave the United States so soon after her sister's death, despite the expired visa, because they needed to care for their nieces and nephews. About six months later, ICE agents showed up at their house and took James into custody. Camille was eight months pregnant and her doctor placed her on bedrest to treat complications of a high-risk pregnancy. James' detention left Camille alone with their young children and managing a difficult pregnancy by herself. Her doctor planned to deliver the baby by C-section earlier than expected because she worried the stress could hurt both the mother and baby. Camille did not have any other family members to offer support. James was in detention for a month, but ABLE secured his release on bond the week before the baby's due date. He was able to be present for the birth of his child and help Camille during and after the birth of their baby because of ABLE's assistance.

**"We are concerned about the stability of our family, because we may be separated from our children. Our lives have been negatively impacted financially and emotionally. Having a lawyer has allowed our family to be reunited."**



Frank has lived in the United States for 23 years. He lived in California with his U.S. citizen wife until one year ago when a friend encouraged him to move to Ohio for more opportunities. Frank and his wife had been looking for a change following a catastrophic car accident that almost killed Frank's wife and left her with serious health problems. Frank came to Ohio first to set up their new home and his wife planned to follow soon after. Frank had never been in removal proceedings, and he had been saving money to file the necessary immigration forms for his wife to petition for him. He wanted to hire an attorney in California because he feared that he may not qualify for immigration relief because of his past. Frank experienced severe depression 17 years ago after his daughter and both of his parents were killed, and he had two DUI convictions on his record from that time. Frank was forced to postpone his plans to hire an attorney and file the immigration forms when his wife was involved in the car accident. A couple of months after moving to Ohio, ICE agents came to Frank's house looking for a previous tenant but took Frank into custody instead.

**ABLE secured a bond for Frank, his friends and family compiled the amount of money necessary to secure his release, and he was released and reunited with his wife in Columbus.**