



Background Info

*Presentation to Commission on Immigrant Affairs
July 8, 2013*

GENERAL INFORMATION

Name of Organization: American Gateways

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OUR ORGANIZATION

Embracing the ideal that all people have a right to equal access to justice, American Gateways provides the legal and educational services immigrants need to navigate our complex immigration system, join our American family, and begin new lives free of torture and abuse. Our clients are asylum seekers, victims of human trafficking, victims of family violence, long-term residents facing removal to their home countries, and DREAMers. Whether fleeing civil war in their home country, an abusive spouse in the United States or the dehumanization of human trafficking—American Gateways is proud of our legacy of being able to provide free or low cost direct legal representation to these traumatized immigrants in Central Texas. Women, men and families from over 75 different countries have been served by American Gateways.

Founded in 1987 as the Political Asylum Project of Austin by attorneys and community leaders, today American Gateways is among the most effective and efficient non-profit providers of immigration legal services in the nation. In 2012 we opened 894 cases and closed 1,290 cases, with a direct benefit to 3,091 people. 836 immigrants received direct representation by American Gateways staff and 58 immigrants were represented by attorneys from American Gateways' pro bono panel.

Just as our founders were there to respond to the refugee crisis from Central America in the late 1980s, today we are positioning our organization to accept the new challenges that upcoming immigration reform will bring while maintaining our current programs.

Our main office is in Austin and we maintain a small satellite office with two staff in San Antonio. Our San Antonio staff work primarily at the South Texas Detention Center providing a Legal Orientation Program (LOP) for detainees. LOP fully funded by a grant from VERA.

For Additional Information about American Gateways please review our website at: www.americangateways.org

OUR MISSION & GOALS

Embracing the ideal that ALL people have a right to equal access to justice, American Gateways provides the legal and educational services immigrants need to navigate our complex immigration system, join our American family, and begin a new life free of torture and abuse.

We operate with three overarching goals:

1. To guarantee access to immigration legal services to immigrants in Central Texas who are too poor to afford private legal representation by providing them with the legal and educational services necessary to navigate our complex immigration system
2. To dispel the myths and misconceptions about immigrants by working to shift public perception through our educational outreach programs
3. To meet the challenges of Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR) – whatever form it may take. With CIR in the forefront of our nation's conscience, and a growing confidence that new forms of relief are on the horizon, we are committed to building capacity to meet the needs of thousands of immigrants who may be eligible for these new forms of relief.

To meet these goals, we provide legal information presentations and workshops at ICE detention facilities and community

meetings, direct legal representation, clinics for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status, and referrals to a vast network of non-profit organizations offering social services. In 2012, American Gateways staff provided direct representation to 836 immigrants, and our panel of 149 pro bono attorneys represented 58 low income immigrants. Ninety-five percent of our services are provided free to indigent clients. For the remaining 5% of cases we charge modest fees that are in alignment with Catholic Charities' fee schedule.

Growing local partnerships is an important tool toward effectively and efficiently serving the immigrant community without unnecessary and expensive duplication of services. Identifying and working cooperatively with other nonprofit service providers is an effective way to maximize local resources and provide clients with all of the tools they need to become stable and successful. American Gateways has an MOU with several Central Texas nonprofits. One such endeavor is our partnership with Center for Survivors of Torture (CST), and Casa Marianella. The Community Supported Release Program is our formalized partnership which allows us to provide clients with the full spectrum of services needed to gain stability and become self-sustaining. Casa provides food, housing, social and medical services. CST performs psychological evaluations, delivers forensic reports for evidence in court, and provides the counseling needed for traumatized immigrants to heal and more effectively participate in their legal cases. American Gateways provides legal representation for these victims of human trafficking, rape, female genital mutilation, torture, and domestic abuse. We also partner with SafePlace, SAHELL, Bastrop Crisis Center, and many others.

LEADERSHIP & SUPERVISION

American Gateways is governed by a board of directors made up of attorneys, bankers, communications directors, technology experts and community leaders. Their diversity of skill and experience is matched by their ethnicity and gender—our Board is a cross section of America. Legal and educational services are provided by a staff of 5 attorneys, 4 accredited representatives, 1 legal caseworker, 1 screening and referral specialist and pools of 149 pro bono attorneys and 100 volunteer translators and interpreters. The agency and overall work of staff and volunteers is overseen by Executive Director Elizabeth Hartman. Legal work is supervised by General Counsel Edna Yang, who has been with American Gateways for over a decade. Program statistics, financials, and client needs are continually evaluated to ensure we are meeting the goals of the agency and the people we serve.

OUR VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

American Gateways has a pool of 100 volunteers who serve as translators, interpreters, social workers, and psychologists. They contributed 4,212 hours in 2012. Our robust Pro Bono Program has 149 pro bono attorneys. In 2012 our panel of pro bono attorneys logged over 4,867 hours representing our asylum, U visa and T visa clients. Social workers and psychologists volunteer their time to do psychological evaluations, forensic reports, and give expert testimony.

Individuals wishing to become volunteers at American Gateways come to us by word-of-mouth and through recruitment efforts at trainings and events. At events where we provide trainings we recruit interested people to help support the services we provide. We host regular free CLE and legal training workshops once every two months at various law firms which highlight our pro bono program and a specific topic area, such as U Visa or asylum. It is through these CLE's that our Pro Bono program continues to flourish and we are able to increase the number of individuals we are able to serve.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In 2012, American Gateways:

- Provided legal services benefiting 8,435 people
- Closed 1,290 cases
- Opened 894 cases
- Provided direct representation to 894 immigrants
- Provided education and pro se tools to 5,344 detainees held in the South Texas Detention Center and the Hutto Detention Center through 376 Legal Orientation Program (LOP) and Know Your Rights presentations. We are one of the few non-profit organizations in Texas providing legal services and advocacy to detained individuals at little or no cost.
- Placed 58 asylum and U visa cases with pro bono attorneys recruited and mentored by American Gateways

Recognized for outstanding commitment to social justice in Central Texas, the Austin Chronicle named American Gateways the Best Legal Services Provider in Austin in 2002. In 2006, American Gateways was also given the Community Service Award from the State Bar of Texas, Hispanic Issues Section and the Daniel Levy Award for Promoting Justice from the National Lawyers Guild.

TARGET POPULATION

Our target population includes both detained and non-detained Central Texas immigrants who have incomes below 200% of the Federal poverty guidelines and cannot afford a private immigration attorney.

Potential clients are screened to ensure that they meet the Health and Human Services income eligibility guidelines. Also we assess the merits of their case and determine whether their case falls into the types of cases we offer (outlined below). Our clients come to us through word of mouth walk-ins, referrals from other non-profit and governmental agencies, through detention center visits, and our own outreach and education programs. Completed screens are reviewed each Friday at our legal review meeting using our internal case acceptance guidelines. Those cases with the likeliest chance of success, or are priorities based on MOUs or grant requirements are accepted as our capacity allows. We provide legal aid to central Texas' most vulnerable immigrants. Without our assistance it would be unlikely that they would be able to access justice or gain legal status in the US.

OUR PROGRAMS

We accomplish our work through five main programs:

- **Program Representing Immigrant Survivors of Abuse (PRISA):** PRISA provides free legal services—including T, U and VAWA visa assistance. We offer legal counsel to survivors of human trafficking, and to immigrant victims of domestic abuse and their children in self-petitioning for residency under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). Many abusive spouses and parents use the threat of deportation to discourage their victim from reporting the abuse to law enforcement. Threatening to withdraw support of the abused immigrant's legal status is a frequently used method to keep the abused immigrant trapped in the cycle of abuse. The vast majority of these clients are women, many of them mothers.

We also promote and use the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (VTVPA) to protect immigrant victims of crime through immigration's "T" and "U" Visa legal provisions. Both visas provide legal immigration status—including work authorization—to victims and certain family members, most of whom will be able to adjust to Legal Permanent Resident (LPR) status after three years.

- **Asylum and Detention Assistance Program (ADAP)** (the focus of this application): This program has two components:
 - Legal Orientation Program and Know Your Rights presentations in the Pearsall (men only) and T. Don Hutto (women only) ICE detention facilities.
 - Free legal representation of indigent immigrants who are detained and/or are seeking asylum.
- **Family Based Immigration Adjustment and Citizenship Program (FBIACP):** Representing 5% of our work, FBIACP is the only program for which we charge a modest fee. Clients must earn less than 200% of the federal poverty guidelines to qualify for services. Fee waivers are generally given to those who cannot afford even a small fee. Most clients pay less than \$300. While FBIACP accounts for only 5% of the work we do, the number of people that benefit when a family member gains legal status can be huge. Their legal status can make it possible for family members to migrate to the U.S., reunifying families that have been separated for years.
- **Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA - DREAMers):** We're proud that even with our limited resources American Gateways was one of the first non-profits in Central Texas prepared to provide legal services to DREAMers. We've screened over 500 applicants and provided services to more than 400 through clinics and direct representation.
- **Outreach:** American Gateways connects with law enforcement, social service providers and community groups to extend the reach of our services throughout Central Texas. Our outreach program educates other providers and law enforcement on how to effectively work with the immigrant community.
- **New Relief:** Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR) is coming and it is incumbent on legal service nonprofits to be ready to serve the 11 million immigrants living in the U. S. Many have lived here for decades, paid taxes, own businesses, and have children in college. American Gateways believes it is a moral imperative that we continue to be the agency that impoverished immigrants turn to, not only for current forms of immigration relief, but also for whatever relief will become available through CIR.

OUR BUDGET & STAFF

- **Budget** - \$873,753. Our audited budget which includes the fair market value of pro bono and professional services provided by Central Texas attorneys, interpreters and translators is \$2 million
- **Staffing** - American Gateways employs 13 FTEs. Our staff is made up of an Executive Director, 5 attorneys, 4 accredited representatives, 1 legal caseworker, 1 development associate, and 1 screening and referral specialist. We contract for technology maintenance, bookkeeping, and auditing services.
- American Gateways maintains a satellite office in San Antonio where one staff attorney and one accredited representative are employed. Working predominately at the South Texas Detention Center (STDC) in Pearsall, they

give Legal Orientation Presentations (LOP) to detainees. Their work is funded through the Vera Institute of Justice's LOP grant.

Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR)

Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR) will bring thousands of impoverished immigrants to American Gateways seeking legal help. While the exact forms of relief are as yet unknown, we do know that it is morally imperative that we be prepared to help. Without agencies like American Gateways these immigrants will fall prey to notarios who will swindle thousands of dollars from an immigrant and leave them with nothing.

Last year we turned away 1,007 immigrants who asked for our help. Can you imagine how much higher that number will be if we do not grow our capacity to provide services before Comprehensive Immigration Reform is passed?

American Gateways has a proud history of being a first responder to the legal needs of immigrants from around the globe. In 1987, a concerned group of local attorneys and community leaders founded our organization in response to the heartbreaking refugee crisis in Central American. Twenty-six years later we hope to honor their commitment to providing immigrants with equal access to justice by being prepared to deliver legal services that encompass whatever new forms of relief CIR will bring. For the first time in decades, comprehensive immigration reform is on the horizon, and American Gateways is committed to expanding our capacity in order to meet the upcoming needs of thousands of indigent immigrants eligible for whatever new forms of immigration relief will become available.

While it's impossible to know exactly what form the relief may take, we do know that we have demonstrated our ability to respond quickly and professionally to new forms of relief. In August of 2012, President Obama issued a directive about Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Within 2 weeks of issuing the directive, American Gateways legal staff had researched potential pitfalls and issues, created forms, document check lists, step-by-step instructions and packets to give DREAMers to use in their document collection process. To date we have screened over 500 applicants and provided services to more than 400 through clinics and direct representation. We are proud to be one of the first nonprofit legal service providers in Central Texas ready to respond.

Although we met the challenge of DACA, our staffing and funding structure necessitated that we do so by asking staff to use post business hours to run clinics (staff salaries are almost 100% grant funded). While American Gateways is fortunate to have dedicated staff, management recognizes that asking staff to respond to CIR on their own time is not a healthy or sustainable solution.

MAJOR FUNDING SOURCES

Public/Private Foundations (majority is IOLTA) – 30%

Private Bar/Bar Foundations – 3%

Faith Organizations (LIRS) – 2%

Government Grants (LOP, CVCLS, THHSC, CJD, OVAG) – 38 %

General Fund-Raising – 17%

Fee Based Income (TPS renewals, DACA applications, family based petitions, etc.) – 10%