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Advancing Local Policies and Building Capacity to Promote Immigrant Rights & Criminal Justice

The [Immigrant Legal Resource Center \(ILRC\)](#) builds a democratic society that values diversity and the rights of all people. Through the ILRC's policy and advocacy efforts, we promote a vision of racial justice that advances the rights of all immigrants, including those who have had contact with the criminal legal system. Our work in Texas focuses on building capacity to pass and implement local policies that dismantle the arrest-to-deportation pipeline and decriminalize immigrants, Black people, and other communities of color. To further these goals, the [ILRC's Texas team](#) employs an array of strategies to advocate for local policies and cultivate partnerships that promote immigrant rights and criminal justice, undercut the impact of one of our nation's most regressive anti-immigrant laws, SB 4, and build power for long-term wins.

Building the Foundation for Truly Intersectional Work

Through trainings, webinars, workshops, facilitated strategy sessions, intensive coaching, and the development of resources, the ILRC strengthens advocates' understanding of the intersections between the criminal and immigration systems. To foster deeper relationships between immigrant rights and criminal justice advocates, the ILRC conducts values-based workshops to create alignment among these fields. The ILRC also convenes intersectional strategy conversations about the criminal legal system's impact on immigrants.

Nurturing Effective Coalitions

The ILRC convenes and facilitates immigrant rights coalitions in San Antonio and Houston. We support these coalitions by cultivating leadership and shared facilitation, providing strategy consultation, supporting campaign development and implementation, providing legal and policy expertise, creating resources, supporting communications needs, and building model policy platforms. By devoting capacity to nurture these coalitions, the ILRC helps to build local power among those directly impacted to influence elected officials and achieve necessary change in local policy.

Winning Policy Change

Building on ILRC's publication, [Moving Texas Forward: Local Policies Towards Inclusive Justice](#), which provides a comprehensive menu of local policies on topics ranging from local criminal legal system reforms, prosecutorial accountability, public defense, measures to reduce arrests, ending contracts with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and increasing access to services for immigrants, the ILRC supports local coalitions and advocates to campaign for policy change. After a policy win is secured, we support our partners to carefully monitor implementation, as well as address concerns and push for improvements with local officials and other stakeholders.



Shifting the Narrative

The ILRC rejects the extreme and dangerous anti-immigrant narrative that justifies the criminalization, incarceration, and deportation of immigrants and other people of color. Our strategic press outreach and digital engagement are grounded in values-based messaging that dispels the false dichotomy of the “good versus bad” immigrant. We develop frameworks and host regular communications trainings for our Texas partners to promote a narrative grounded in inclusivity, dignity, and racial justice.

Building Legal Capacity in Texas

The ILRC builds the legal capacity of immigration legal service providers and criminal defense attorneys to provide quality representation to immigrants. Texas is an epicenter for federal immigration enforcement, with the highest number of ICE arrests, detentions, and deportations in the country. This strains the capacity of removal defense practitioners and demands new skills to respond to the needs of



the immigrant community. Because ICE relies heavily on local law enforcement and jails to identify, arrest, and detain immigrants, criminal defense attorneys must also be more attuned to the risks of ICE enforcement, as well as the immigration consequences of criminal offenses for noncitizens. Our webinars on immigration law topics are free to all Texas nonprofit organizations and public defenders, and we conduct quarterly removal defense trainings for Houston-area practitioners. We also train and create resources for criminal defense attorneys on best practices for representing noncitizen defendants, the risks of immigration enforcement within jails, and how to challenge illegal ICE practices, and we partner with public defender offices to offer “know your rights” information for defendants.

Fostering Cohesion Among Advocates Across the State

The ILRC supports immigrant rights and criminal justice advocates across the state to build strength and cohesion by facilitating weekly statewide advocate calls, hosting statewide convenings, and developing a collaborative of groups who respond to anti-immigrant and criminalizing attacks in Texas. Through resisting Operation Lone Star (Gov. Abbott’s scheme to criminalize migrants seeking safety in the United States), we have deepened our work with criminal justice and civil rights organizations and formed a strong infrastructure to organize against this inhumane, unlawful, and costly operation.

Examples of ILRC's successes in Texas

San Antonio and Bexar County

Through our work growing the SA Stands coalition in San Antonio, we secured a historic \$1 million immigrant legal defense fund for individuals in Bexar County who are facing deportation. We work with legal service providers and community members to ensure the implementation of the fund is led by community input.

We also successfully advocated for the City of San Antonio to offer an enhanced library card, which acts as an alternative to traditional government-issued forms of ID that may not be available to undocumented immigrants and other vulnerable populations, and we have engaged in community outreach to ensure accessibility. SA Stands also participates in several de-criminalization initiatives, including an ongoing cite and release campaign and city budget advocacy.

San Marcos and Hays County

Through our intensive capacity building support to Mano Amiga, a local community-based organization, we authored and won the first cite and release ordinance in Texas, which went into effect in 2020 in San Marcos. The ordinance seeks to reduce arrests and deportations by directing police officers to utilize alternatives to arrest for individuals accused of citation-eligible offenses, such as possession of small quantities of marijuana, petty theft, and traffic offenses, which are common drivers of the arrest-to-deportation pipeline.

Austin and Travis County

The ILRC helped to write Austin's "Freedom City" resolutions, and we have monitored their implementation through regular participation in the Freedom City working group. The resolutions have greatly reduced arrests in Austin and uplifted immigrants' constitutional rights during encounters with local law enforcement. In addition, we have educated the Travis County District and County Attorney offices on how to mitigate the draconian immigration consequences that flow from criminal charges.

Houston and Harris County

Along with our partners in Harris County, we defeated the District Attorney's request for a \$20 million budget increase, thereby preventing increased prosecutions. Instead, we ensured some of these funds were redirected to the County's Public Defender's office to hire immigration experts. The ILRC was also a key player in pushing Harris County to create an immigration legal services fund, distributing \$2 million in funding to nonprofit immigration legal service providers to provide removal defense representation for low-income Harris County immigrant residents, particularly those who are detained. This fund, the largest of its kind in Texas, increases access to legal counsel for individuals in Harris County who are facing deportation.