

**CSAC CHALLENGE AWARD NOMINATION
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:
UNACCOMPANIED/UNDOCUMENTED CHILDREN DEPORTATION DEFENSE PROJECT**

Overview:

Sonoma County instituted a cross-departmental pro bono legal representation program for unaccompanied/undocumented immigrant children facing deportation.

Challenge:

The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors established this Project as a direct response to the humanitarian crisis of the unprecedented waves of desperate children who fled gang violence and other forms of oppression and traveled alone from Central America, only to arrive in the United States to face detention and deportation. From 2011 to 2014, the number of children detained at the border by the Department of Homeland Security increased tenfold, from 6,500 per year to well over 60,000 in 2014. With Immigration Court calendars exceeding 100 youth a day, local legal resources were completely overwhelmed.

Most children will remain unrepresented. Statistics show that 9 out of 10 children without representation are deported; those represented secure legal status about 50% of the time. Without legal representation, Sonoma County children likely will be deported back to the dangerous conditions from which they fled, regardless of their eligibility for relief.

Solution:

Sonoma County was the first local government public law program in the country to authorize County attorneys to handle these cases on a pro bono basis during County work time. To launch the program, Sonoma County attorneys received free training from a legal services support group, and recruited immigration specialists from the local bar to serve as volunteer mentor attorneys. Attorneys are paired in teams to work jointly on cases and access volunteers in the Health and Human Services Departments (e.g., bilingual social worker or psychologist) to provide client support. Bay Area non-profits refer Sonoma County children to the program for possible representation. This program provides for cross-department collaboration and partnerships with the private bar and non-profit sector, and creates a model for future efforts in other areas.

This Project aligns with our highest ideals of protecting children from violence and exploitation. Of the six cases to date, Sonoma County attorneys have secured legal status for four Sonoma County children, and two more cases are

ending. A volunteer program administrator in the County Counsel's office helps with case coordination. Each volunteer is required to obtain the approval of their supervisor and to pledge that they will obtain the necessary training/support to handle the cases as well as maintain their current workload.

Cost Effectiveness:

There is not a separate appropriation for this Project. Staff time is on an authorized volunteer basis during work hours. The departments' sponsoring attorneys provide supplies and other incidental costs as needed. Fee waivers are usually obtained for court costs. Free training and consultation have been obtained for support.

Results:

Sonoma County attorneys have accepted all Unaccompanied Child (UAC) referrals received for children living in the County, and have provided a full range of legal services, from limited advice and counsel to full representation in two asylum cases and two SIJS (Special Immigrant Juvenile Status) cases. Volunteer attorneys, social workers, psychologists, interpreters, and support staff have all worked together to secure legal status for these Sonoma County children. As shown by national statistics, when unaccompanied immigrant children are represented by attorneys, receiving relief from deportation and obtaining some type of legal status in the country is expected in at least 50% of the cases. Sonoma County volunteers have ensured that 100% of our client children have been deemed eligible for legal relief, and have secured legal status in the United States.

In addition to the case results, positive outcomes from the program have included the following: increase in staff morale by teaming staff to work together, inter-departmental collaboration on issues of strong mutual commitment, support for the local Latino and immigrant community, and partnerships with the private bar and non-profit organizations. At least two other public law offices have obtained information from Sonoma County about our efforts and have replicated similar programs, including the Santa Clara County Counsel's Office and the Los Angeles Unified School District Office of the General Counsel.

Project or Program Contact: Rebecca Wachsberg, Deputy County Administrator, Rebecca.Wachsberg@sonoma-county.org, (707) 565-3782; Bruce D. Goldstein, County Counsel, (707)565-2421; Bruce.Goldstein@sonoma-county.org.