

SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
Senator Thomas Umberg, Chair
2025-2026 Regular Session

SB 1194 (Caballero)
Version: March 24, 2026
Hearing Date: April 14, 2026
Fiscal: Yes
Urgency: No
ME

SUBJECT

Immigration Legal Fellowship Project

DIGEST

This bill establishes the Immigration Legal Fellowship Project (ILFP) within the Department of Social Services (DSS) for the purpose of expanding access to high-quality immigration legal services, including, but not limited to, removal defense, in rural and underserved regions of California.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Trump administration has aggressively targeted immigrants for removal from this country. Although immigration proceedings can result in detention and removal, immigrants are not entitled to government funded legal representation because immigration proceedings are civil. California has created programs to provide immigration legal services to immigrants. For the past five years the state has funded a five-year pilot of the ILFP. The ILFP has expanded access to immigration legal services by recruiting and training early-career attorneys, placing them with trusted legal service organizations, and building long-term legal infrastructure in communities that have historically been underserved.

This bill establishes the ILFP within DSS for the purpose of expanding access to high-quality immigration legal services, including, but not limited to, removal defense, in rural and underserved regions of California.

The bill is sponsored by Immigrant Defense Advocates and supported by organizations that support immigrant rights. There is no timely opposition to this bill. If this bill passes out of this Committee it will then be referred to the Senate Committee on Human Services.

PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE LAW

Existing law:

- 1) Requires DSS, subject to an appropriation, to provide grants to qualified nonprofit organizations through contracts, in order to provide certain immigration-related legal services to persons residing in, or formerly residing in, the state. The grants are aimed at obtaining certain immigration remedies and benefits, assisting with the naturalization process and an appeal arising from the process, or providing legal training and technical assistance. (Welf & Inst. Code §§ 13300-13310.)

This bill:

- 1) Establishes the Immigration Legal Fellowship Project (ILFP) within the Department of Social Services (DSS) for the purpose of expanding access to high-quality immigration legal services, including, but not limited to, removal defense, in rural and underserved regions of California.
- 2) Provides that DSS shall administer the ILFP to support legal fellowships for qualified individuals, as defined, who provide immigration legal services, including, but not limited to, representation in removal proceedings, affirmative immigration relief, and related legal services.
- 3) Provides that DSS shall award grants or enter into contracts with nonprofit entities to operate legal fellowships, which shall include, at a minimum, all of the following components: (a) recruitment, placement, coordination, and hosting of legal fellows; (b) training, mentorship, and supervision of legal fellows; and (c) technical assistance and programmatic support necessary to ensure the effective delivery of legal services by legal fellows.
- 4) Provides that for purposes of administering the ILFP, DSS may establish eligibility criteria, application requirements, and funding priorities, including, but not limited to, criteria specific to serving rural and underserved communities.
- 5) Specifies that DSS shall include information on the use of funds appropriated for the ILFP in reports or updates provided to the Legislature regarding DSS immigration programs, as specified.
- 6) Provides that the law regarding the ILFP shall not be construed to limit the authority of DSS to administer other immigration-related programs, as specified.
- 7) Specifies that implementation of the ILFP is contingent upon an appropriation by the Legislature.

- 8) Defines “nonprofit entity” as an entity that meets the requirements of Section 501(c)(3) or 501(c)(5) of the Internal Revenue Code or in Section 23701 of the Revenue and Taxation Code and that meets the requirements in subdivision Welfare and Institutions Code section 13301.
- 9) Defines “qualified individual” as a licensed attorney or a recent law school graduate.

COMMENTS

1. Stated need for establishing the Immigration Legal Fellowship Project

According to the author:

Many of the communities most affected by immigration enforcement, especially in rural and underserved regions of California, have too few trained and too little removal defense capacity to meet the need, particularly when the lack can result in family separation, detention, and deportation. SB 1194 builds on a model California has already tested successfully. The five-year pilot of the Immigration Legal Fellowship Project demonstrated that a state-supported fellowship can expand access to immigration legal services by recruiting and training early-career attorneys, placing them with trusted legal service organizations, and building long-term legal infrastructure in communities that have historically been left behind. Over the last five years, the pilot program supported 19 fellows at 13 nonprofit organizations, expanded services across 39 counties, and provided more than 2,500 legal services all while strengthening local legal capacity and workforce development in these communities.

Just as important, the pilot did more than help individual clients – it strengthened organizations and created a durable workforce pipeline. Host organizations increased their capacity, some became newly eligible for removal defense funding, and many fellows have remained in public service roles. This bill is not only about immediate representation; it is also about building a sustainable statewide system of due process support where it is needed most. SB 1194 makes the Immigration Legal Fellowship a permanent program within the California Department of Social Services to ensure access to immigration legal services in our most underserved communities continues to grow.

2. Codifies a 5-year pilot project that has proven successful in aiding rural and underserved communities with immigration defense

A coalition of groups committed to supporting immigrant rights, including the bill sponsor Immigrant Defense Advocates, writes the following in support of codifying the five year pilot project:

Immigration court proceedings carry life-altering consequences – family separation, loss of livelihood, and forced return to danger – yet immigrants in removal proceedings are not guaranteed an attorney. This creates a severe access-to-justice gap, particularly in rural regions of California where there are fewer nonprofit legal service providers and fewer attorneys trained to handle complex deportation defense.

California has taken important steps to invest in immigration legal services. But even with dedicated state funding, a persistent obstacle remains: capacity. Many of the regions with the highest need – such as parts of the Central Valley, Central Coast, and Inland Empire – have historically had too few organizations with the staffing, training structures, and program infrastructure necessary to provide representation at scale. In other words, funding alone cannot solve the problem if communities lack organizations equipped to deliver the services.

ILFP was designed to solve this structural problem by building sustainable legal capacity where it is most needed. The Fellowship pairs early-career attorneys with experienced mentor organizations for intensive training and ongoing technical assistance, while placing Fellows with host organizations serving rural and underserved communities. This model strengthens both the attorney pipeline and the organizational infrastructure needed for long-term community-based representation.

The Fellowship approach also creates statewide benefits: strengthening rural legal capacity reduces pressure on already-overextended providers in larger metro areas, builds regional partnerships, and establishes a continuum of services between organizations near immigration courts, those near detention facilities, and those located farther away but serving communities affected by aggressive immigration enforcement. The first large scale raid against California’s immigrant community in 2025, “Operation Return to Sender”, took place in the Central Valley, where the 3-day operation terrorized the community leading to 78 arrests. Workforce attendance in orchards plummeted immediately. Some farms reported that 75% of their workers stayed home out of fear. A Stanford University study later found that these raids led to over 81,000 lost school days in the region as parents kept children home for safety.

Placing the Fellowship into statute is essential to ensure stable, predictable support for underserved communities and to preserve the institutional structure that makes this model effective. Codification will also help California remain prepared to respond to shifting federal policies and any future immigration reform – by ensuring that trained attorneys and capable host organizations exist across the state, not only in major urban centers.

The ILFP pilot was in effect between 2021 and 2025. According to the fellowship organizations, 19 fellows were placed with 13 host organizations. They provided 2,545 legal services. The host organizations built the experience required to become eligible for state immigration removal defense funding. A high percentage of the fellows continued public service work after their fellowship ended. This bill would codify the ILFP program.

SUPPORT

Immigrant Defense Advocates (sponsor)
California ChangeLawyers
Center for Gender & Refugee Studies-California
Central Valley Immigrant Integration Collaborative
Centro Binacional para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño
Centro La Familia Advocacy Services, Inc.
Immigrant Legal Defense
Immigrant Legal Resource Center
Imperial Valley Equity and Justice
Jewish Family Service of San Diego
Monterey County Supervisor Wendy Root Askew
Moreno Institute
Oasis Legal Services
San Bernardino Community Service Center, Inc.
Santa Cruz County Office of Education
SB County Immigrant Legal Defense Center
Thai Community Development Center
Vera Institute of Justice
Watsonville Law Center

OPPOSITION

None known

RELATED LEGISLATION

Pending Legislation: None known.

Prior Legislation: SB 89 (Committee on Budget, Ch. 24, Stats. 2017) funded legal services for immigration defense.
