

# **SAFE PASSAGE PROJECT**

2022-2023

# OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

Safe Passage Project’s mission is to ensure that every child in New York who is eligible for substantive immigration relief receives high-quality legal representation. We believe no child should face the immigration process alone.

Over the course of this grant we:

- Screened 383 children;
- Opened 264 new cases for full representation;
- Closed 113 cases successfully (cases where our client has a path to citizenship via asylum, Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, U-Visa, T-Visa, or green card)

Almost all of our clients are unaccompanied children under the age of 21 who traveled to the United States seeking refuge and are now living with an adult sponsor in the New York area. The population we serve includes children who are homeless, who have fled gang violence, who identify as LGBTQ+ and who faced serious threats in their home countries, and who are survivors of gender-based and sexual violence. While the majority of the young people we work with typically come from the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, we serve children from all over the world who are seeking refuge in the United States. 96% of our clients identify as Hispanic/Latino, 2.5% as Black (African American/Garifuna), and less than 1.5% as Asian, Caucasian, or other.

Securing legal status for our clients puts young people on a path to citizenship and makes them legally eligible for benefits including state-based college tuition, health insurance, and social security. Since our start in 2013, Safe Passage Project has grown rapidly and expanded our capacity to take on new clients every year since.



**Population Served:** Children facing deportation

**Total Funding:** \$4,710,667

**Total IOLA Grant:** \$110,000

**Staffing Full Time Equivalents:**

- Total Staff: 44
- Lawyers: 28
- Paralegals: 6
- Other: 10

We officially re-opened our offices in 2022 following pandemic closures and began welcoming staff back to their desks on a hybrid schedule. Our interim executive director, Desireé Hernández Sánchez, successfully led Safe Passage Project through a 12-month period of leadership during which time she helped the organization rebuild and expand the staff team. We were happy to announce the hiring of our new Executive Director, Angela Fernández, who began her new role in August 2022. Angela brings 20 years of courageous leadership in the areas of law, non-profit management, advocacy and development. Angela served as the Executive Director and Supervising Attorney of the Northern Manhattan Coalition for Immigrant Rights (NMCIR) for ten years. As the former New York State Commissioner for the Division of Human Rights, Angela led a successful turn-around of this investigatory agency. Prior to her leadership role at Northern Manhattan Coalition for Immigrant Rights, Angela held numerous positions in media, policy and education fields. She is a graduate of Boston University and Columbia University School of Law.

We have also recently hired several key positions on our legal, social work, and operations teams in order to increase our capacity to meet the increased client need and provide the necessary infrastructure to sustain our work and support future growth. These positions include three staff attorneys, a paralegal, two social workers, and several key positions on the operations and human resources side of the organization, including a new Development Manager and Data Manager.

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## DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES: CASES

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### *Client O*

O entered the United States through the border with his mother in July 2019. They were fleeing gang violence in El Salvador. They were both placed into removal proceedings upon entry. When O came to Safe Passage Project for an intake, he was 8 years old. Upon review of the intake, we discovered that O's father was a naturalized citizen. Both the mother and father (non-married) have been co-parenting the child since his arrival to the U.S. Safe Passage Project attorney, Nicholas (Nick) Coronel, had extensive conversations with O's parents to explore O's father's path to naturalization, and to collect further details pertaining to the family relationship—particularly that of O and his father.

O's father became a U.S. citizen prior to O's birth. After his birth, his father traveled from the U.S. to El Salvador to register himself as the birth father. After further

research on "acquisition of citizenship at birth for out of wedlock children" Nick deduced that our client had been a U.S. citizen since birth. With the assistance of his supervisor, Shevon Lewis, they gathered as much evidence as possible (tax returns, employment records, property deeds, driver's licenses) to fulfill the father's residency requirements, amongst other elements to establish derivative citizenship. They then applied for O's U.S. passport through the Department of State. After 10 months and two (2) Department of State requests for additional information, the passport application was granted, and O received his U.S. passport. The family was excited to have achieved this huge victory. We are currently in the process of obtaining a termination of O's Immigration Court's removal proceedings terminated based on his status as a U.S. citizen.

**2,090**  
people  
benefitted from  
**1,045**  
*immigration*  
legal cases  
closed

### ***Client M***

After six (6) years of advocacy, M received his green card and became a legal permanent resident of the U.S. M, now 25 years old, came to the U.S. from Barbados when he was 3 years old. He was abandoned by his father in Barbados, and his mother later passed away in New York when he was 9 years old. M has been living in Brooklyn with his grandmother ever since. When M came to SPP, he had multiple juvenile delinquency adjudications. He also had two separate criminal charges, which have been dismissed.

M came to the U.S. on a tourist visa and was never in removal proceedings. At the time we were preparing to submit M's I-360, petition for SIJS, he was over the age of 18 and USCIS had recently begun challenging and denying petitions filed by youth in New York who had received family court orders when they were 18 or older. At this time, the Trump Administration had also enacted a policy to place affirmative petitioners in removal proceedings if their benefits requests were denied by USCIS. The combination of the USCIS policy, NTA policy, and his prior interactions with law enforcement, meant that M had a difficult decision to make. He ultimately decided to take the risk and move forward with his immigration case. After his I-360 petition was approved, Senior Staff Attorney Livia Santoro submitted an excellent I-485 packet, highlighting the positive equities in his case, and as a result, USCIS granted his application without requesting further information regarding his juvenile delinquency adjudications.

## OTHER SERVICES: OVERVIEW

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Safe Passage Project provides community legal education to community partners such as schools/educators and religious institutions that serve immigrant communities. We provide these trainings so that our community partners better understand the immigration system, and feel empowered to make appropriate referrals to Safe Passage. During the grant period, we provided other legal related services to 168 people.

**168**  
people benefitted  
from  
*Community Legal  
Education Services*

## OTHER SERVICES: TECHNOLOGY

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In order to better facilitate our systems as a hybrid workplace, Safe Passage Project contracted with an IT firm to oversee our technology systems. This has allowed us to quickly troubleshoot technology issues, and implement standardized cyber-security and tech practices across our teams. We have also recently hired a Data Manager who is working on optimizing systems for all of our departments, and overseeing a shift to Salesforce Lightning, a more powerful version of Salesforce that has deepened our work with our data and reporting systems, saved time by automating key processes like case updates, and increased our program efficiency.

## OTHER SERVICES: TRAININGS

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Safe Passage consistently offers free trainings to our staff to improve their knowledge of the law. For example, staff have ongoing free access to the Practicing Law Institute and trainings hosted by Safe Passage and partner organizations. Safe Passage sponsors the annual Asylum and Immigrant Law Conference, which our staff attend to learn the latest in asylum practice, as well as serve as panelists. We also encourage all of our staff to seek out outside professional development opportunities by providing a professional development fund to each of our staff members as an annual benefit.

At Safe Passage Project, we foster and invest in future supervisors, managers and leaders. We continuously seek new opportunities for all staff and Board members' involvement and development. We are part of several professional groups that promote events that we pass on to our staff to assist them in their individual professional development and growth.

# PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

Our Pro Bono Program leverages the resources of 550+ attorneys every year. Under the close mentorship of our senior staff attorneys, these volunteers represent up to 70% of our cases, providing an estimated 68,000 volunteer hours, valued at over \$2M. Our seasoned staff mentors them closely to ensure service provision of the highest quality. This model allows us to take on even more cases than we would otherwise be able to with a staff of our size. These volunteers stick with their clients every step of the way and offer high quality legal services. Many pro bono attorneys come back year after year to take on additional cases; some even take on more than one case at a time.

Our pro bono mentorship model sets us apart because our expert staff closely guide our pro bono volunteers, which results in success for a larger number of clients. To better support our pro bono attorneys, we recently launched North Star, a web portal that includes downloadable sample litigation documents, training videos, and other information intended to assist pro bono attorneys in their representation of immigration youth. Similarly, we have begun sending a pro bono email newsletter, Guide for Practitioner Success (GPS), which includes updates on our work, our new case bulletin, and event information.



**962 Attorneys volunteered 70,015 hours**

**33 Law Students volunteered 3,300 hours**

**204 Other Volunteers volunteered 7,280 hours**

Each  icon is equal to 119.9 volunteers.

Attorneys are represented through the Green Figure.

Law Students and Other Volunteers are represented through the Grey Figure.

In addition to our work with volunteer attorneys, we also work with over 70 volunteer interpreters. These interpreters partner with pro bono attorneys who do not have law firm resources to assist with client interpretation. These interpreters form part of a multidisciplinary team to support our clients: Safe Passage mentor attorney, pro bono attorney, interpreter, and social worker.

Apart from our amazing pro bono attorneys and the volunteer interpreters working directly on the cases, we have a team of volunteers that year round support our work. During this period, we had 403 attorneys and 104 Spanish language interpreters who trained and volunteered to provide prospective clients legal screenings. We also had the support of 20 New York Law School students volunteering with our attorneys during the school year to provide legal assistance in our cases. We have partnered with students attending different CUNY programs for years to serve as college volunteers, assisting our paralegals and support staff in their direct client work. During this period, we had 12 students working on our cases to assist our clients. During the summer of 2022, we had a robust summer internship program where we were joined by 13 law school students, 12 college students and several social worker interns.

Finally, providing support to our clients also includes providing them with the much-needed social services referrals. During this period, 12 social worker students joined our social workers team to support our clients in accessing housing, medical services, mental health services, and educational services among others.

Our volunteers are a crucial part of our operations and work. We are so glad to have a robust community of volunteers who respond to our call for action to assist immigrant children in need. Their work helps us create capacity for our staff, which is crucial at a time of immense need in our community.

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## **SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS**

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Safe Passage is a founding member of Immigrant Children Advocates' Relief Effort (ICARE), a coalition of nonprofit organizations that provides free legal services to immigrant children. We work together to ensure representation of children who may not have attorneys. We also work together to advocate for more just policies and rules for child refugees. ICARE was founded in 2014 to address the needs of immigrant youth in New York City. With seed funding from the New York City Council and the Robin Hood Foundation, the ICARE Coalition has grown significantly over the past 9 years. Our coalition now represents over 1,600 immigrant youth facing removal proceedings.

During the grant period, the constituent member organizations of ICARE commissioned a consultancy to assess the future of ICARE. Our consultant's recommendations were to create a separate fiscally-sponsored organization, leanly staffed by an Executive Director and Program Associate, to help raise funds for the constituent ICARE organizations, to help coordinate clients, and to advocate for policies that will benefit the member organization's clients. During the grant period, we did successfully create a fiscally-sponsored organization under the Fund for the City of New York, and we hired an Executive Director. The ICARE Executive Director works closely with the ICARE advisory board to explore funding opportunities and policy actions.

Safe Passage Project is a member of the End SIJS Backlog Coalition, which is a national coalition of legal services providers that works with youth who are eligible for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS). Special Immigrant Juveniles are frequently stuck in a long "visa backlog," which prevents them from applying for their greencards and leaves them in limbo for years as they slowly move forward in a visa "line." Safe Passage Project takes a lead role in both the administrative advocacy and legislative working groups. Thanks in part to our advocacy, the Biden Administration announced during the grant period (April 2022) that it would provide deferred action and work permits to youth caught in the visa backlog; this is a huge change and benefit to Special Immigrant Juveniles. In addition, we regularly hold listening sessions with USCIS, the immigration court, and the Department of State to address issues facing Special Immigrant Juveniles, and to propose solutions. In April 2023, Safe Passage Project was instrumental in securing a meeting with Senator Gillibrand's office to discuss a legislative solution to the SIJS visa backlog.

On Long Island, Safe Passage Project works with the Health and Welfare Council, the New York Immigration Coalition, the Central American Refugee Center, the Immigrant Justice Corps, Hofstra Law School, Touro Law School, and others. We also work with a network of national partners, statewide nonprofits, and law firms throughout New York to represent immigrant children in deportation proceedings, to influence state and federal policy, and to file joint reports. We maintain close ties with the ACLU and the NYCLU.

Our social work team maintains a vetted network of trusted community partners that provide timely and comprehensive health, social, educational, and other services necessary for a child's well-being. These include:

- Public Health Solutions – a nonprofit organization in all 5 boroughs providing health insurance enrollment.
- HRA - city agency for public benefits enrollment (Cash Assistance, SNAP, Medicaid, CityFHEPS vouchers, HEAP, child care vouchers).



- IDNYC - city agency for municipal IDs.
- Terra Firma - nonprofit organization in the Bronx for medical and mental health services.
- BronxWorks - nonprofit organization in the Bronx for health insurance enrollment and food pantry.

We are also a member of the Public Interest Pro Bono Association (PIPBA), which is comprised of pro bono professionals on the non-profit/legal services side. Members participate in DEI trainings and strategize about best practices in the delivery of pro bono legal services. During the grant period, we attended two day-long conferences with other nonprofit leaders and law firm pro bono coordinators, where we had frank discussions about trends in pro bono service provision, nonprofit needs, and law firm capacity.

## SOURCES OF FUNDING

Safe Passage Project received  
**\$4,710,667**  
 in total funding this past year

<b>Foundations</b>	<b>\$1,106,286</b>
<b>IOLA Grant</b>	<b>\$110,000</b>
<b>City and County</b>	<b>\$1,773,652</b>
<b>Fundraising</b>	<b>\$1,419,848</b>
<b>State Funding</b>	<b>\$261,086</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>\$39,795</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$4,710,667</b>

