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Lower Hudson Valley Partnership Report



Introduction

About IJC and CCCS

The first and only fellowship of its kind, **Immigrant Justice Corps (IJC)** identifies promising lawyers and advocates passionate about immigration, grants them a two-year fellowship, and places them with legal services and community-based organizations where they can make the greatest difference and supports them with training and expert insights as they directly assist immigrants in need.

Inspired by faith and moved to action, **Catholic Charities Community Services (CCCS)** reaches out to the poor and vulnerable. It serves the homeless, the hungry and the physically, mentally and emotionally challenged. A comprehensive range of professional human services are also offered to youth, neglected children, the elderly and immigrants. CCCS Immigrant & Refugee Services Division has been a leading provider of quality immigration legal assistance in New York City and the Lower Hudson Valley for nearly fifty years, providing low-cost and free consultations and direct representation to low-income and indigent New Yorkers.

New York's Lower Hudson Valley

A core tenet of Immigrant Justice Corps' mission is making quality counsel accessible to immigrant communities that need it most. IJC's fellowship program increases the capacity of host organizations across the country – creating opportunities for new and innovative counsel in chronically underserved areas. One of those regions is the Lower Hudson Valley, where Justice Fellows have been placed since 2015. Just outside the reach of New York City's dynamic network of resources, the Lower Hudson Valley has long suffered from a lack of legal services for immigrants. **Catholic Charities Community Services (CCCS) had a vision to change that.** Starting with their first class of Immigrant Justice Corps Justice Fellows in 2015, CCCS have used the IJC Fellowship program to permanently change the landscape of legal services in the Lower Hudson Valley.

New York's Lower Hudson Valley encompasses the seven counties within the Archdiocese of New York: Westchester, Putnam, Dutchess, Ulster, Orange, Sullivan, and Rockland counties. Prior to 2015, the Hudson Valley was one of three regions of New York state that had higher concentrations of foreign-born residents than the nation as a whole.¹ Despite being the home to thousands of immigrants, options for low-cost or free immigration legal services in the area were nearly nonexistent. Local

social services agencies, schools, community advocates, and even law enforcement agencies often did not have the knowledge, resources, or experience to deal with issues faced by immigrants on a daily basis. While CCCS had local offices in each county and provided some consultation services, their capacity was limited to affirmative, straightforward immigration cases, meaning many immigrants who could ultimately benefit from CCCS' expertise were not able to access it.

"We were operating on an emergency ad hoc basis and without dedicated funding," said Maryann Tharappel, Special Projects Director, Immigrant & Refugee Services at Catholic Charities.

Aside from CCCS, some counties like Sullivan and Orange had only one other immigration legal service provider for low income individuals, but their funding

was also restricted to immigrants with status or to provide affirmative, straightforward relief. In other counties, like Putnam, CCCS was and remains the *only* localized non-profit immigration legal service provider. Increased migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America, leading to entire communities from Guatemala and Honduras relocating to the upper counties of New York, further expanded an already dire need for quality representation.

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The dearth of affordable legal services also makes the Lower Hudson Valley a prime target for unscrupulous attorneys who charge thousands of dollars to desperate families, submitting applications for relief that they are not eligible for, and often putting immigrants directly into removal proceedings in the immigration court.

When Catholic Charities began its partnership with Immigrant Justice Corps in 2015, they had a shared vision to utilize Justice Fellows and expand access to complex immigration legal services and representation in this isolated and underserved region of New York. **Five years later, it has accomplished this and more.**

When the first IJC Justice Fellows joined CCCS, everything changed. "Our goal for the first year was to become the legal face for the region. We learned a lot in that first year," said Maryann.

The first IJC Fellows to join CCCS in 2015 were Victor Cueva and John Travis. "It was a little overwhelming at first," said John.

"It's like a donut hole here — everywhere else has services except for the Lower Hudson Valley. We were overbooked and had a waiting list in the first year," said Victor. A few local partners had the trust of the immigrant community, but legal services were often outside that circle

of trust. It became apparent that much work was needed to gain the trust and partnership of existing community-based organizations, advocates, local law enforcement, and the courts, if the work was going to be successful.

The co-Fellows dived in, hosting "Know Your Rights" sessions across the region, giving the community tools to recognize fraud and information about what to do if ICE shows up at a home or work place. They also worked quickly to set up a consultation model.

¹A Portrait of Immigrants in New York, Office of the New York State Comptroller, November, 2016, <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/sites/default/files/reports/documents/pdf/2018-12/economic-immigrants-2016.pdf>.

The Fellowship Experience

Every IJC Fellow at CCCS is blazing their own path in new areas of the Lower Hudson Valley, expanding access to justice, increasing representation, and empowering a community that had been left behind.

IJC Fellows at CCCS maintain a caseload where 100% of their clients are Lower Hudson Valley immigrant residents, over 75% of which is removal defense representation for asylum, VAWA in removal, and special immigrant juvenile status (SIJS) cases. CCCS focuses on unaccompanied children as well as recently arrived families. They also maintain an affirmative caseload of U/T visas, affirmative asylum, and provisional waivers. Fellows rotate through regional centers providing intakes as well as staffing the CCCS' Community Legal Clinics, and each Fellow provides over 200 consultations per year.

Since bringing on IJC Fellows in 2015, Catholic Charities has also been able to take on detention cases for children and adults, and has seen success in *every single* family court in all seven counties of the Lower Hudson Valley.

The IJC Fellowship may be just two years, but Maryann and her team are investing in IJC Fellows for the long haul. Maryann gives each Fellow creativity and space to grow and create a program that closes a gap in the communities they serve. In order to develop this nuanced programming, Maryann said mentorship and supervision, "are not something that's aspirational, it's required."

"We want them to feel so invested and that they've created something so important, that they want to build further and watch it grow. I simply give them the space and support to do it," Maryann said. **One hundred percent of CCCS Justice Fellow alumni have stayed in the non-profit immigration legal services field, and 60% continue to serve the Lower Hudson Valley.**

IJC Justice Fellow alumni at CCCS now work alongside incoming IJC Fellows, as colleagues and as mentors. "That level of connectivity really cannot be replicated," Maryann said.

After his Fellowship ended, Class of 2015 alumnus John Travis transitioned into his role as the Supervising Attorney for the Community Legal Clinics program at CCCS and as a mentor and supervisor of new IJC Fellows.

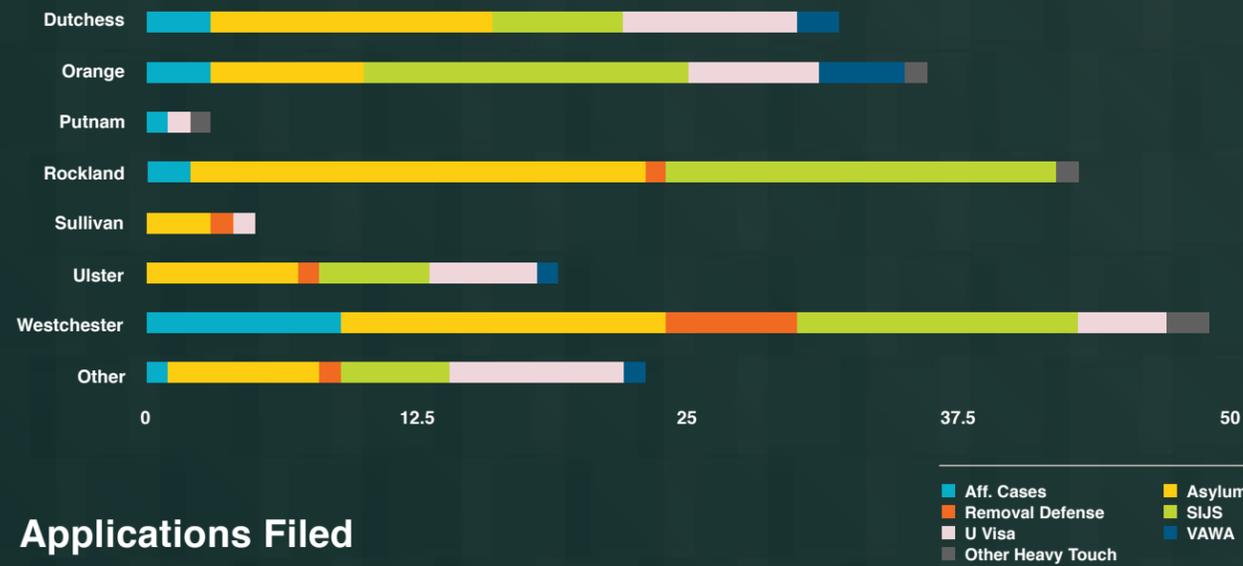
"One of the great things about having worked here for so long is that I've seen a lot of the cases through from start to finish. That's been very rewarding," said John. "By traveling to the Lower Hudson Valley and meeting clients in their own communities, we have helped a lot of people who would have otherwise gone unrepresented. We have really been making a difference in the Lower Hudson Valley," he said.



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Our Impact

Cases by County



Applications Filed

Type of Application	Number filed
Unlawful Presence Waiver	1
U Visa	16
Petition for Amerasian, Widow(er), or Special Immigrant	9
Other	61
Naturalization/Citizenship	1
Immigrant Petition	1
Green Card Renewal	1
FOIA (Freedom of Information Request Act)	4
Family Court Petition	8
Employment Authorization	22
DACA	2
Application for Asylum	28
AOS (Adjustment of Status)	6
Advance Parole	1
Total	161

47 deportations prevented
Engaged in removal defense for 39 Adults With Children (AWC) Defensive Cases



Community Legal Clinic

To meet the growing need for representation, the consultation model eventually evolved into the Community Legal Clinic, a consultation-based service model held once a month in different parts of the Lower Hudson Valley. Launched in April 2017, the clinic increases Catholic Charities' capacity to provide quality legal services to more of the community. After each clinic, all the cases are reviewed and those that are eligible for some kind of relief are referred to attorneys at Catholic Charities or to the **CCCS Pro Bono Project**, where former Fellow Victor Cueva, serves as a supervising attorney. For individuals who are not eligible for relief, the consultations are still an important opportunity to empower community members with knowledge about their status and options so that they don't get taken advantage of by notarios or unscrupulous attorneys.

The Justice Fellows are essential in sharing their knowledge of the community landscape and in tapping their connections for crucial information on where services are especially needed. Their attendance at every clinic meant that immigrant attendees were receiving legal advice and

information from experienced attorneys with knowledge of where they actually lived, and who deeply understood what immigrants faced in each county, what additional challenges they might face, and how best to overcome those challenges.

Since the inception of the Community Legal Clinic, Justice Fellows have completed over a quarter of the total number of initial legal consultations at these events, helping nearly 650 individuals walk away with a deeper understanding of their options, rights, and other available resources in the area. The added capacity of the Justice Fellows meant that around 20% of the cases identified with relief were assigned to them for in-depth follow up after each clinic, capacity that simply did not exist before the Fellows joined CCCS.

- **27% of CLC consultations are done by IJC Fellows.**
- **IJC Fellows have been assigned to 138 CLC consultations identified with potential relief.**



Victor Cueva speaks to a client at the Community Legal Clinic.

Law Enforcement & District Attorneys' Offices

The Justice Fellows also focus on developing relationships with law enforcement agencies and the Family Courts to educate officers, judges, and District Attorneys on the eligibility requirements and procedures for certain types of immigration relief. Specifically, the Justice Fellows have expanded accessibility and increased probability of approval and/or certification of Special Findings Motions in Family Courts and U-Visa Certification Requests throughout all seven of the LHV counties.

CCCS Justice Fellows began their initiative by joining the Westchester County U-Visa Group, a working group of local legal service providers focused on increasing awareness amongst law enforcement of the eligibility requirements of a U-Visa and their role in certification. Our Fellows met with both the Westchester County District Attorney and the Chief of Police in Yonkers to discuss how criminal law enforcement and immigration legal providers could work together to ensure cooperation and justice for all parties. In a show of trust between the Westchester County DA's office and CCCS, one of our Justice Fellows acted as liaison between the DA's office and his client during an active criminal trial to both protect the interests of his client and to encourage cooperation

in the DA's prosecution. This cooperation eventually led to a signed U-Visa Certification and additional supporting evidence for the U-Visa application provided directly by the DA's office. This initiative was repeated in Orange County, where Justice Fellows established a relationship with the DA's Office that continues to allow CCCS to advocate directly on their clients' behalf.

Family Courts

A significant area of practice for the Justice Fellows in the Lower Hudson Valley has been providing representation to minors eligible for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, work that has become especially important since 2014, when the numbers of unaccompanied minors seeking refuge in the LHV skyrocketed. Family Court clerks and referees in the LHV had very little experience dealing with the motions and proceedings required to begin this process, and so it was up to Justice Fellows to lead the way.

In Dutchess County, the Fellows faced a challenge with the Family Courts relating to misunderstanding by the local court that minor children must be appointed counsel, and that the Fellows could only represent the parents in guardianship/custody proceedings. In order to educate the court regarding Family Court proceedings as they relate to Special

Immigrant Juvenile Status, the Justice Fellows began consistently introducing the statute during proceedings, which clearly states that the minor child may choose his/her own representative. As a result, the Fellows, and now other CCCS attorneys operating in Dutchess County, no longer encounter this issue while representing youth in Family Court.

Empowering the community against fraud

In addition to expanding capacity and providing direct representation, an important part of the Justice Fellows' role in the LHV is in disseminating accurate information and dispelling myths that leave immigrants in these isolated communities particularly vulnerable to fraud.

For IJC alumni Victor Cueva, serving the Lower Hudson Valley immigrant community was a dream come true. When Victor was 11 years old he moved with his family from Peru to Kingston, New York, where he lived, undocumented, for 10 years. During that time, a lawyer promised his father a work visa, but after the family handed over a large sum of money, the lawyer stopped returning their calls. "It made me realize I wanted to be an immigration lawyer and one day come back to this area and make sure no one goes through this again." When Victor learned about the IJC Justice Fellowship while in law school, he knew the opportunity to be a Fellow would give him the training and strong network he needed to fulfill this dream. As an IJC Fellow with CCCS, he returned to his community in the Lower Hudson Valley in 2015, but this time as the immigration attorney his family needed all those years ago. Today, Victor is a Pro Bono Supervising Attorney at CCCS where he mentors volunteer attorneys throughout the course of their representation of immigrant clients. Victor is the first Pro Bono Supervising Attorney to sit permanently in the region.

As one of the first Fellows to serve in the region, Victor's advocacy and commitment helped lay the groundwork for community empowerment and accountability, even leading to a community member taking down a scam artist. Through local partners, CCCS learned that there was someone posing as a

"notario" in Yonkers, defrauding mainly immigrant families with U.S. citizen children by charging \$8,000 for bogus U visa applications. Throughout Latin America, the term "notario" is understood to mean a licensed attorney, however in the U.S. a "notario" means someone who is simply a notary. Unscrupulous scammers will call themselves a "notario" to gain the trust of the Spanish-speaking immigrant community, but in reality they often do not have a law license or are familiar with immigration law.

A community member familiar with CCCS went to a consultation with this notario and recognized his scam right away. She recorded him and with a community advocate's support, reported it to the police and reached out to CCCS for guidance. This notario was arrested and is currently being prosecuted by the District Attorney's office in Westchester, but the question remained of what would happen to the families he defrauded.

Through two emergency screening events, CCCS was able to screen 40% of the families defrauded to help determine whether any of them had other relief options. After much internal strategy discussion, coordination and collaboration with the Westchester County DA's office, CCCS was able to represent 18 individuals in formally requesting withdrawal of the fraudulent applications from USCIS and advocating for discretion not to allow their cases be referred to immigration court for removal proceedings. Former IJC Fellow, John Travis, Class of 2019 IJC Fellow Lesly Santos, and two CCCS Pro Bono attorneys assisted each family in writing their own statements regarding how they were victimized and to compile letters of support from elected officials, friends, family, churches, and community leaders in order to bolster their request for discretion.

In January 2020, 18 withdrawal requests were submitted to USCIS. In May, CCCS received Letters of Acknowledgement that all the fraudulent applications were successfully withdrawn. While the future remains uncertain for some of the families involved and the criminal case against this notario is pending, with the support of the Justice Fellows and CCCS, there is hope that they will be able to move forward with their lives.

Client testimonial

Mr. Ramirez fled the Guatemalan Civil War in 1992, and settled in Brewster, NY, where he built a life and a family, but lived without lawful immigration status. In 2016, John Travis met Mr. Ramirez at an individual consultation and discovered that his U.S. citizen son was also an active member of the U.S. Army. John agreed to represent Mr. Ramirez in an application for Military Parole in Place, a temporary protection from deportation afforded to parents and spouses of service members of the U.S. armed forces. When John finished his fellowship and transitioned to his new position as the CLC Supervising Attorney at CCCS, he continued to work on Mr. Ramirez's case. In May of 2018, Military Parole in Place was granted.

Following Mr. Ramirez's Military Parole in Place grant, John worked with Mr. Ramirez and his son to take the next step in Mr. Ramirez's path towards permanent residence by preparing a family-based petition and green card application.

John filed Mr. Ramirez's family based petition and green card application in

August 2018. In November 2019, after nearly a year-and-a-half of waiting to hear from USCIS, Mr. Ramirez's green card interview was finally scheduled in Albany, NY. John and Mr. Ramirez travelled to Albany for his interview and enlisted the help of a local volunteer network to provide a Spanish interpreter. While the interview went well and we anticipated receiving Mr. Ramirez's green card within the following two weeks, months went by without any updates from USCIS. John kept the pressure on USCIS to issue Mr. Ramirez's green card, spending several hours on the phone with USCIS customer service and requesting assistance from Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand's office.

Finally, at the end of March 2020, USCIS approved Mr. Ramirez's case and issued his green card. After 28 years of living in the United States, Mr. Ramirez is now a permanent resident. As soon as it is safe for Mr. Ramirez to travel given the COVID-19 Pandemic, he plans to travel to Guatemala to reunite with his parents, who he has not seen since he fled Guatemala in 1992.

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Investing in the future

We hope that in the next five years, no immigrant in the Lower Hudson Valley will have to navigate the complex immigration system alone.

The impact on LHV immigrant communities as a result of this partnership cannot be overstated. Through extensive advocacy and relationship building, the Justice Fellows have created a solid foundation for other attorneys practicing immigration law in the LHV, that ultimately benefits the diverse immigrant communities throughout this vast region. Their advocacy also bolsters trust in services from CCCS, and the Fellows often receive requests to appear on immigration-related panels, speak on local radio shows about our services, and provide Know Your Rights presentations to community members and Train the Trainer sessions for allies.

By investing so much in each Fellow, we can create a standard of quality representation that the whole community can rely on. Maryann has used that energy and investment to help build a case for support and attract new funders to the region-based programming. “It’s what IJC was meant to do. It is investment in the initial phase of creating a legal advocate.”

IJC’s partnership with CCCS proves just how transformational the Fellowship model can be.

IJC is committed to reaching as many underserved areas as possible until universal representation is a reality.

Jojo Annobil
Executive Director,
Immigrant Justice Corps



Immigrant Justice Corps is proud to call Catholic Charities Community Services of New York one of our longest and most trusted partners. Five years ago we joined CCCS in an audacious vision — to provide the Lower Hudson Valley immigrant community with the resources and immigration legal services it desperately needed and deserves.

IJC’s Fellowship model is two-fold: as we recruit and train the next generation of immigration lawyers and advocates, we also increase the capacity of legal services providers by matching our Fellows to where the need is greatest. CCCS has fully embraced their role as a host organization by nurturing and supporting the Fellows’ growth. Their commitment to the region, and to the accessibility of quality representation in the area has been unwavering, and their team has embraced our Fellows with open arms. The fact that 2015 IJC Justice Fellow, John Travis and Victor Cueva are now Supervising Attorneys at CCCS for incoming IJC Fellows is a testament to this model. Earlier this year, John shared a story with me about then-first year Justice Fellow Lesly Santos. “In Lesly’s first ever merits hearing, the judge was blown away by her preparation and presentation of her client’s asylum case. The judge said, *‘I see a lot of these cases and this is one of the best prepared cases I’ve seen.’*” This level of excellence is what both IJC and CCCS are constantly striving for in growing the next generation of immigration lawyers.

While we have made immense progress and measurable impact, there is still so much work to be done. We must continue to extend our reach in the region, substantially close the representation gap and build community empowerment to keep immigrant families together. We hope that in the next five years no immigrant in the Lower Hudson Valley will have to navigate the complex immigration system alone.



Maryann Tharappel
Special Projects
Director, Immigrant &
Refugee Services, CCCS,
Archdiocese of New York

Catholic Charities is humbled by the impressive representation impact for Lower Hudson Valley immigrants through our partnership with Immigrant Justice Corps. Since 2015, we have had the privilege of hosting eight Justice Fellows, each of whom bring unique perspective, service driven talents, and inherent dedication in expanding access to justice for vulnerable immigrant communities.

IJC’s commitment to providing support and expansive training for Fellows combined with CCCS steadfast focus on substantive and professional mentorship creates a perfect storm for a developing attorney to flourish, find their footing as well as passion in this complex field, and to create programming that meets under-served needs. This collaboration provides sustenance to the core purpose of service for both our organizations. CCCS IJC Justice Fellows develop into community advocates and leaders in immigration law. These attorneys are proud of their launch into this field as Justice Fellows and continue to serve as frontline representatives, supervisors, clerks, pro bono developers, and program creators. This long-term commitment is what both CCCS and IJC endeavor to support for all future advocates and our partnership is a successful testament in this journey.

CCCS IJC Justice Fellows are difference makers, advocates who are unafraid of the unknown, they lean into challenges, fiercely elevate underrepresented voices, and are inherently dedicated to our mission of providing help and creating hope. As this challenging work continues, expands, and new hurdles are confronted daily, CCCS is proud to stand with IJC in the fight for justice for all, today, and for years to come.



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