



MEDIA RELEASE

Immigration Attorneys at the Cook County Public Defender's Office Begin Representing Immigrants in Removal Proceedings

May 9, 2022, CHICAGO – In a historic step, attorneys from the Cook County Public Defender's Office Immigration Unit Pilot have begun representing immigrants in bond hearings and removal proceedings before the Chicago Immigration Court.

Through the work of the Immigration Unit Pilot, Cook County is the largest county in the nation to provide public defenders to serve immigrant communities that are often under-represented in court proceedings. Hundreds of immigrants every year who cannot afford an attorney appear before the Chicago federal immigration court with no representation, which can lead to unjust outcomes.

"Our immigration system is fundamentally unfair due to the lack of representation for most detained noncitizens who appear in immigration courts. In Cook County we are beginning to address this problem - which affects immigrants of all races and from around the globe - with the work of the immigration attorneys in the new unit," said Cook County Public Defender Sharone Mitchell.

In early 2022, Governor JB Pritzker signed Public Act 102-0410 into law and the Cook County Board of Commissioners passed a resolution in support of this initiative. This authorized the defender's office to begin representing noncitizens in removal proceedings.

The Immigration Unit Pilot – supported by a mix of public and private funds - currently has two staff attorneys, an attorney supervisor and a paralegal. For information on how the unit is prioritizing and accepting cases please see fact sheets on the Cook County Public Defender's Office website in [English](#) and in [Spanish](#).

In addition, the Cook County Public Defender's office is collaborating with the Midwest Immigrant Defenders Alliance, a group of immigration legal aid organizations that are working on expanding access to legal representation for people in deportation proceedings who are detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Three nonprofit organizations, the National Immigrant Justice Center, The Resurrection Project and The Immigration Project will lay the groundwork toward the goal of ensuring anyone who is detained by ICE and facing removal proceedings before the Chicago Immigration Court has access to legal representation. For more information on the collaboration see this [announcement](#).

The Defenders for All coalition - representing 40 organizations - was a key force in bringing about the creation of the Immigration Unit Pilot and celebrates the work it has begun.

"Providing legal representation for immigrants is very important, not just for the protection of civil rights, but the economic stability of our small businesses that are largely owned or managed by immigrants in their local communities. That is why the Illinois Business Immigration Coalition (IBIC), a chapter of the American Business Immigration Coalition, helped lead the Defenders for All coalition that pushed for the Immigration Unit Pilot," said Ken Kimber, Director of Small Business Recovery and Resiliency for IBIC. "The legal aid provided by this program will lessen the chances that wage earners and

small business workers are removed from their families and employers and subjected to removal proceedings without warning and due process.”

Removal proceedings can have dire consequences for many immigrants, including permanent separation from U.S. citizen children, spouses, and parents, as well as the loss of integral members of our communities. In some cases, deportation may even result in someone being sent to a country where they will face persecution or death. Yet individuals in these proceedings do not have access to government-appointed legal counsel like defendants in other parts of the U.S. legal system.

A 2016 [study](#) found that detained immigrants are 11 times more likely to pursue relief when they have legal counsel and are twice as likely to obtain relief than detained immigrants without counsel. In fiscal year 2021, about 60 percent of detained individuals were unrepresented in the Chicago Immigration Court.

About the Law Office of the Cook County Public Defender – The [Cook County Public Defender's](#) mission is to protect the fundamental rights, liberties and dignity of each person whose case has been entrusted to us by providing the finest legal representation.

The Law Office of the Cook County Public Defender is one of the largest criminal defense firms in the United States, with more than 500 attorneys and nearly 700 employees overall, representing tens of thousands of Cook County residents charged with every type of criminal offense and child protection violation.

About the Defenders for All Coalition – The coalition represents more than 40 organizations that backed the creation of a dedicated immigration unit within the Cook County Public Defender's Office. Follow D4A's work on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#):

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