

When Charlotte became The Immigration Project Executive Director in 2017, she was one of 4 immigration attorneys with a total staff of 5 and a budget of \$350,000. In 7 years the organization has grown into a staff of 45, a budget of over \$7 million, and a mission that has kept pace by expanding the provision of legal help to including services that support the whole person, recognizing that people need more than just legal services – they also need social services and a community that accepts and welcomes them.

In the past 7 years under Charlotte's leadership, The Immigration Project has gone from 300 to over 900 legal consultations a year; giving legal advice to 100 unaccompanied minors; and offering a variety of social service presentations to more than 10,000 individuals last year, advice on their eligibility for public benefits, housing relief, public health, DACA renewals, and asylum.

Governor Pritzker tapped her for one of only 7 individuals to serve on a task force to look at the Right to Counsel for possible legislation.

In 2018, Charlotte served on a panel with someone from the McArthur Foundation. The McArthur Foundation gives grants to deserving organizations but the catch is that you can't apply for the grants; they just find worthy organizations and contact them with money. The McArthur Foundation panelist was so impressed with Charlotte's leadership at The Immigration, the foundation awarded the organization \$100,000.

In 2024 The Immigration Project received a \$2 million grant from Yield Giving, a philanthropic initiative founded by Mackenzie Scott. The unrestricted grant is part of Yield Giving's Open Call, aimed at rewarding U.S.-based nonprofit organizations that support under-resourced people and places.

The Immigration Project is one of only 279 organizations nationwide to receive the maximum gift of \$2 million. In total, 361 nonprofits were awarded grants through a year-long, three-part review process of more than 6,000 applicants.

The nonpartisan Immigration Project connects immigrants to legal and social services in 86 central and southern Illinois counties, with a headquarters in Normal. In some counties considered [legal deserts](#), the Immigration Project is the only agency providing immigration services.

"We're looking at making sure no one is forgotten in the in-betweens," Immigration Project Executive Director Charlotte Alvarez said in a recent interview with WGLT. "There's no 'flyover country.' There's no 'pass-through country.' There are people in our communities who need help and services."

Since 2020, the Immigration Project has awarded more than \$6 million in direct relief payments to immigrant families. The new grant, however, will be used to bolster the agency's core mission to aid immigrants in navigating the legal process and adapting to their communities.

Alvarez was one of 21 women featured in WGLT's 2024 series [21 Women Who Shaped Bloomington-Normal](#). Under her watch, the Immigration Project has seen an eight-fold increase in staff and [quadrupled its office space](#) in Normal.

From WGLT story: "Charlotte Alvarez never expected to be in Bloomington-Normal this long. But she's always been clear on her career path.

As high schoolers in Lafayette, Ind., Alvarez and her boyfriend sat down for a serious talk. “He said, ‘I need to tell you something that’s shaped my entire life. I am illegal,’” Alvarez said. It set Alvarez on a path that eventually led her to the [Immigration Project](#), a nonprofit organization that helps immigrants navigate the system and connect with service providers in their communities.

“He literally thought his existence was a crime,” Alvarez said, when in fact he was undocumented and lacking immigration documents. “It shaped every part of his decision-making process and how he was living his life.”

The need for competent, trustworthy immigration attorneys was made crystal clear as they navigated the system together. Charlotte studied immigration law at Harvard, working on behalf of people facing eviction for the Harvard Legal Aid Bureau and helping to start the Harvard Immigration Project, which trains students to represent detained individuals.

“I went to Alabama thinking rural spaces are where the need is at,” she said, “and then really found my home here in the heartland in a similarly situated city to my hometown in Lafayette—making sure, regardless of where people end up, they have access to legal services.”

The Immigration Project serves 86 counties in Central and Southern Illinois, with a headquarters in Normal. The scope of the work is intentionally broad and flexible to meet fluctuating needs. It also intentionally excludes metro Chicago, where service agencies are far more plentiful.

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As executive director, Alvarez drove an [organizational expansion](#) including a new welcome center and eight-fold increase in staff—a testament to both her leadership and the need for the Immigration Project’s services.

“She stepped up and was immediately a perfect fit for this,” said board member Laurie Bergner, who was part of the team that hired Alvarez. “She’s not only a great attorney; she has vision. The word that everyone says when they talk with her is ‘amazing.’”

Part of the work is simply pointing immigrants in the right direction by connecting them with existing resources within their communities. Another part is promoting visibility between and among immigrant communities—and in the community at large—while fostering welcoming, inclusive spaces.

The nonpartisan Immigration Project is not focused on policy making; rather, their purpose and passion is to support immigrants in navigating a confusing, inefficient and convoluted process—regardless of how or why they came to the United States.

“Our mission is bigger than us and unachievable,” Alvarez said. “We want to help people reduce those barriers and get roots so they can excel and be awesome members of our community long term.”

Finally, it is significant that the McLean County Chamber of Commerce awarded the Best Non-Profit award to The Immigration Project—a recognition of Charlotte’s strong leadership and vision in our community.