

Supporting Noncitizens in Vermont: Vermont Poverty Law Fellow Update

By Maya Tsukazaki, Esq.

I remember the surprise on the faces of many of my mentors and peers in Washington, D.C. when I told them that I would be moving to Vermont to practice immigration law. Flatlanders, as well as many Vermonters, do not think of immigration legal services as a high need in the state of Vermont. However, very soon after beginning my role in the immigration clinic at Vermont Law and Graduate School as the eighth Vermont Poverty Law Fellow, I was struck by the significant dearth of immigration legal services in the state. As of this writing, Vermont is the only state in the country with only a law school clinic listed on the Immigrant Advocates Network, a national directory of immigration service providers. This is noteworthy in a state where the 2020 census still reports that 4.3 percent of the population was born outside of the United States.

Now more than ever, legal services for noncitizens in Vermont are essential, so I am incredibly thankful that supporting this underserved population is the mission of my fellowship. In the past few years, Vermont has not only welcomed hundreds of individuals from Afghanistan, but also asylum seekers fleeing crises from other countries around the world. In addition, increased immigration enforcement locally, as well as massive backlogs and added procedural complexities in adjudicating immigration petitions, make immigration legal services even more urgent.

In the past nine months, I have worked with clients from fifteen different countries and every inhabited continent, ranging from recent arrivals to the United States to a client who has lived in Vermont for four decades. Noncitizens may choose to come to Vermont for employment, to reunite with family, or for educational opportunities, sometimes without intent of staying permanently until a crisis or incident of violence changes their plans. Our clients also choose to come here because of Vermont's reputation as a champion of human rights, or because of support they receive from the robust community support networks throughout the state.

Now, in the volatile world of immigration law, attorneys, advocates, and noncitizens are forced to find creative solutions, including innovations at the state level. Since the passage of Act 98 during Vermont's 2022 Legislative Session, an area of focus during my first three quarters has been supporting vulnerable noncitizen children in obtaining Special Immigrant Juvenile Status. I have now

represented several Vermont high school students through this process, each of whom can now continue planning for their education, their careers, and overall futures in the United States.

I see part of my mission as Vermont Poverty Law Fellow being to raise awareness of the needs of noncitizens in Vermont, also recognizing that Vermonters with lived experience in the immigration system are too often ignored and need to be heard. As I approach my second year as the fellow, I hope to identify more opportunities to maximize my impact through pro se assistance, education, and systems advocacy.

This work would not be possible without the Vermont Bar's support of the Vermont Bar Foundation's Vermont Poverty Law Fellow fund. Thank you for your support, and thank you for selecting me as your fellow.