

# Immigration Advocates Network:

## Harnessing the Power of Technology and Collaboration to Increase the Capacity of the Immigration Legal Services Sector

By Pam Weisz

Amid intense debate at local, state and national levels over immigration policy and accelerating deportation rates, overstretched immigration legal service providers and other advocates struggle to serve millions of low-income immigrants. One resource they increasingly turn to is the Immigration Advocates Network (IAN), a collaborative project of 11 leading immigrants' rights organizations and Pro Bono Net. The IAN site, [www.immigrationadvocates.org](http://www.immigrationadvocates.org), offers advocates access to more than 5,000 substantive resources and trainings on a wide range of immigration law and policy topics and encourages information sharing and networking among those working toward the common goal of increased access to justice for low-income immigrants.

IAN was developed in response to the significant challenges faced by nonprofit immigration legal services organizations around the country. Often small, under-resourced and increasingly located in rural areas where immigrants have settled in recent years, these groups face constant flux in laws, public opinion and demographic patterns. The IAN partners<sup>1</sup>, with initial support from the Carnegie Corporation, saw a unique opportunity to greatly increase the capacity of the nonprofit immigration legal services sector by collaborating on a free online resource to provide access to high-quality legal trainings and resources, promote information sharing and increased communication and networking among advocates, and develop web-based tools that increase the efficiency and effectiveness of legal services on the ground.

IAN's partners began the planning process in 2005, with a convening of leading immigrants' rights groups. There was consensus that common challenges existed that could be addressed with a central online resource and technology-enabled tools to increase access and reduce barriers. After a planning and pilot phase, IAN officially launched in April 2008. While the initial focus was on supporting nonprofit advocates, a Pro Bono Resource Center was launched in October 2010. IAN now serves a network of more than 5,000 members from all 50 states. In addition to the Carnegie Corporation, supporters include the Knight Foundation, Four Freedoms Fund, Silicon Valley Community Foundation and the Zellerbach Family Foundation.

Resources available on IAN include a comprehensive library of substantive materials, including manuals, podcasts, online videos and webinars; a national



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calendar of immigration trainings and events; immigration news and practice alerts; and listservs and announcement lists on immigration topics. IAN's library includes such topics as asylum, family-based immigration, immigration and crimes, naturalization, U visas, VAWA, raids, state and local enforcement, and immigration policy.

"As a training and legal support agency, CLINIC recognizes that IAN helps to build not only much needed capacity in the nonprofit immigration field, but also creates a unique and active community of immigration advocates that can interact and support one another online," said Maria Odom, executive director of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network (CLINIC), one of IAN's founding partners. "The legal community greatly benefits from IAN's innovation, and so do the children, detainees, asylum seekers, victims of violence and other vulnerable immigrants in dire need of legal representation."

IAN has continued to be a leader in exploring how the use of technology can empower legal services advocates, as well as low-income immigrants themselves. New tools developed by IAN and its partners include CitizenshipWorks, a project that helps service providers and immigrants navigate the naturalization process; a national online directory of immigration legal service providers; and an online Community Forum moderated by expert immigration attorneys on a volunteer basis.

"IAN is a powerful example of how technology can be used to foster collaboration, and to connect and empower a community of advocates, regardless of where they are located," said Mark O'Brien, executive director of Pro Bono Net. "With CitizenshipWorks, IAN is now making important strides in the area of technology-enabled service delivery, which can help nonprofit providers to scale their services to meet growing demand."

CitizenshipWorks, a project of IAN, the Immigrant Legal Resource Center, and Pro Bono Net, represents an exciting development in the use of technology to deliver services to individuals and expand the capacity of legal services organizations. The site ([www.citizenshipworks.org](http://www.citizenshipworks.org)) provides easy-to-use online tools to help low and moderate-income immigrants answer important questions about their eligibility for naturalization, learn about the naturalization process, and prepare for the civics and English tests. The website is currently available in English and Spanish, with plans to expand to other languages in the coming year.

Specific tools available via CitizenshipWorks include an interactive interview to help individuals to understand their eligibility for naturalization; a self-paced, interactive tutorial that explains the naturalization process step-by-step; a tutorial to help applicants prepare for the naturalization tests; and links to other online resources and information about citizenship and naturalization. An online directory of nonprofit organizations providing naturalization application services will be added later this year.

In addition to enabling individuals to find legal help, CitizenshipWorks is being piloted by immigration legal services organizations seeking to assist more clients through technology-enabled naturalization group processing workshops. These organizations can access online tools, resources and support via a separate, password-protected area of CitizenshipWorks. Early adopters include the



Center for Employment Training (CET) in San Jose, the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO), and the International Institute of the Bay Area-Redwood City.

The National Immigration Legal Services Directory, which launched in September 2011, provides searchable listings for more than 900 free or low-cost nonprofit immigration legal services providers in all 50 states. Users can search by geographic region, types of legal assistance provided, populations served, and languages spoken. The directory was developed by IAN and Pro Bono Net, with support from the Four Freedoms Fund. The Directory is available through the IAN site ([www.immigrationadvocates.org/nonprofit/legaldirectory](http://www.immigrationadvocates.org/nonprofit/legaldirectory)). A public version of the directory designed to help low-income immigrants find legal assistance on their own will be launched later this fall at [www.immigrationlawhelp.org](http://www.immigrationlawhelp.org).

The IAN Community Forum is an online message board that allows IAN members to ask questions and discuss immigration law and policy topics with other advocates. IAN members can pose questions about issues they are currently involved with and seek feedback from other members who have dealt with similar issues. The Forum was developed in partnership with the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA), one of IAN's partner organizations, and expert AILA attorneys moderate each section of the Forum on a pro bono basis.

Looking ahead, IAN will continue to seek new ways of expanding the capacity of the immigration legal services field. "IAN and its partners are firmly committed to exploring how it can best serve the immigrants' rights community," says Matthew Burnett, IAN's Director. "We have achieved a lot in three years, but there is much more that we can do if we continue to leverage innovative technology, foster robust collaboration, and engage openly with our members and the field. It's a new and exciting paradigm for the legal services community, and one that invites replication in other areas of legal need." ■

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*To learn more about the Immigration Advocates Network, visit [www.immigrationadvocates.org](http://www.immigrationadvocates.org). For additional information, please contact Matthew Burnett at [mburnett@immigrationadvocates.org](mailto:mburnett@immigrationadvocates.org).*

1 IAN partner organizations include the ACLU Immigrants' Rights Project, American Bar Association Commission on Immigration, American Immigration Council, American Immigration Lawyers Association, ASISTA, Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., Immigrant Legal Resource Center, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, National Immigration Law Center, National Immigration Project, NLG, Pro Bono Net and The Advocates for Human Rights.