

Creating a Safe Space is Advocacy



The National Immigration Law Center is among the leading organizations exclusively dedicated to defending and advancing the rights of immigrants with low income. The Council's Policy Organizer Regina Reed recently spoke with staff attorney Alvaro M. Huerta about immigration policy and opportunities for collective advocacy.

Image courtesy of the National Immigration Law Center

Regina: Let's start with our common ground. The goal and mission of the National HCH Council is to prevent and end homelessness. How do immigration policies relate to poverty and homelessness?

Alvaro: There are many policy issues that are directly related. A major one is family reunification. Our current system emphasizes this. When you're able to join friends and family it makes it easier to stay housed and be a part of a community. On the flip side, we have deportation policies that leads to parents being deported. This pulls the rug out from under a family and can push them into homelessness. Another major policy issue is eligibility for public benefits. Most immigrants are not eligible for public benefits for the first five years, which makes it much harder to stay afloat.

R: Storytelling and sharing lived experiences is an important part of our work at the National HCH Council. This is also paramount to the work you do. Can you tell us more about that?

A: When we have policy debates on immigration, the people affected by the policy are often not included. It's important they speak about their own story. At NILC, we do that through a podcast called the [Butterfly Story Collective](#), where we empower immigrant plaintiffs to take the lead and share how they are affected, which builds empathy with the public. It's incredibly powerful- showing the public the bigger story- especially for Dreamers. The story is not just about themselves but about the adult parents who brought them here, who also have dreams. Sharing stories is brave – some people may face negative consequences.

R: Access to affordable housing is a major issue for our community. How does this tie in with your work?

A: We've heard of landlords who [use immigrant status against tenants](#). They may keep conditions terrible or threaten to evict the family. And many immigrants feel they have no protections so they never complain. We saw a few years ago that some localities [made it even easier for](#) landlords to kick documented family members out of their home. Overall, there is a general sense of fear and lack of power immigrants feel if their immigration status is not secure.

R: There are many divisive and confusing narratives around immigrants. A common one is that immigrants are using our resources without contributing to society. Can you speak to that, particularly around housing and health care?

A: Despite the myth that immigrants are using all of our resources, studies show (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) that immigrants use public benefits and public service programs at much lower rates than -U.S. born citizens. There are immigrants paying federal, state, and local taxes and that don't see benefits. And certainly undocumented immigrants may never see the benefits of social security and Medicare. At the same time, we want immigrants to use services

because we know when people have access to health care and other benefits they are then [better able to provide for their families](#) and maintain employment.

R: We did a webinar together in May that covered current policy issues. Since then, what's changed and what do we need to know?

A: The first thing you should know about is the ongoing need to reinforce safe spaces. You may be familiar with the traumatic and outrageous story of Rosa Maria Hernandez, a child with cerebral palsy who was escorted to the hospital and then detained by ICE in Texas after an emergency gall bladder surgery. This story contradicts the policies of the federal government which says that places like health centers are sensitive locations, safe spaces, where no one should be conducting immigration enforcement. We need to work to re-up the idea that these are safe spaces and make sure people know about it. The second is an upcoming rule that we've learning about from a leaked document. Currently, immigrants must pass a "public charge test" that shows they won't be burden to the federal or state government before they are allowed to migrate to the United States. This new potential rule would expand the criteria so that an individual must prove they won't be reliant on public benefits, to include public housing and possibly Medicaid, before becoming a permanent resident. If this new rule is implemented, it means any individual who may need public housing or Medicaid would not be allowed to obtain residency. This will be force many people to decide between providing for their families or giving up the search for legal residency. It's a lose-lose situation and could increase the number of folks living in poverty.

R: We are a large network of health administrators, clinicians, providers, and consumers. How can we advocate on these issues?

A: You have tremendous power as a community that works with consumers. *Creating a safe space is advocacy.* Making your health center a protected space is powerful advocacy. Where you see harm from enforcement practices, document it and share with our representatives how these actions are harming our communities.

R: We are hearing from folks in our community that recent immigration policy activities have made clients harder to track down and some aren't showing up to appointments. How can we work against this?

A: Make your health center a safe space. Small gestures can go a long way. Make sure front line staff can communicate in the languages the community speaks. Put out information on knowing your rights and make it very visible. Let clients know how to react if immigration enforcement comes knocking at their door.

R: Final words for advocates?

A: There's a lot we can do. We can tell our stories. We can make sure our local, state, and federal reps understand the harmful nature of policies. There is another way. We can chose to integrate. Immigrants are an important part of our community, and not just for the obvious economic reasons. They are people. They contribute to our communities. They are raising children who are the future of this country. We don't have our hands tied. We can push back.

Learn more from our partners at the National Immigration Law Center:

- [Access to Health Care, Food, and Other Public Programs for Immigrant Families under the Trump Administration](#)
- [Health Care Providers and Immigration Enforcement: Know Your Rights, Know Your Patients' Rights](#)
- [KNOW YOUR RIGHTS: Is it Safe to Apply for Health Insurance or Seek Health Care?](#)
- [CONOZCA SUS DERECHOS ¿Es arriesgado solicitar un seguro de salud o recibir cuidado de salud?](#)
- [WEBINAR: Immigration Enforcement and Health Centers](#)

Join us at our National Conference in Minneapolis where Alvaro will be presenting on immigration and health centers alongside experts from the Health Care for the Homeless community. [Register here.](#)