

Minnesota Children & Families Immigration Court Project

Recent arrivals from Central America, unaccompanied children, and families with children, are being handled on a separate docket. In Minnesota, these hearings are taking place initially on Tuesday and Thursday mornings before Judge Castro at the Fort Snelling Immigration Court. Continued hearings are held usually in the afternoon on Tuesday and Thursdays. For individuals who need a lawyer but cannot afford one, the Minnesota Children & Families Immigration Court Project, a collaboration of three of the major free legal service providers for immigrants in Minnesota, is screening cases for representation.

Volunteer attorneys, coordinated by Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid (MMLA), The Advocates for Human Rights and the Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota (ILCM) are available for case screening meetings after the initial hearings on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. These are screening interviews, lasting approximately 30-45 minutes per individual, with the purpose of getting background information about the person's immigration situation in order to assess legal remedies. The volunteer attorneys are not committing to ongoing representation. After the screening interview, the intake forms are referred to one of the three partner agencies for further review.

In many cases, the organization will need to contact the child or family for further intake screening before deciding if they can provide representation on the case. Every individual who is screened will receive a letter from at least one of the agencies, indicating whether or not they will receive free representation.

The agencies are advising potential clients to continue seeking counsel on their own. Although every effort is being made to accommodate as many individuals as possible, not every person will be eligible for services due to income restrictions, geographic restrictions, case type, or agency capacity.

If a person does not talk with a volunteer attorney at the first hearing, they should call one of the following agencies for an intake before their next hearing:

Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid – (612) 332-1441 – if you are an unaccompanied child.

The Advocates for Human Rights – (612) 341-9845 – if you are an adult with children.

Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota – (651) 641-1011 – if you reside in Southern Minnesota.

For attorneys interested in volunteering, there are two options:

- 1) Pro bono representation is needed for children and families going through the court process. Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid is coordinating SIJS case representation; The Advocates for Human Rights is coordinating asylum representation. All of the agencies listed above have pro bono opportunities to represent families and children. As more cases move forward through the court system, full representation of children and families is the greatest need.
- 2) A pilot project is underway for volunteers to conduct the initial screenings at court on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. Volunteers are asked to commit to spending ~4 hours at court at least once per month, sitting in on hearings and interviewing potential clients. Spanish language skills are useful, but not required, as interpreters are available when needed.