



THE
LEGAL
CLINIC

IMMIGRANT JUSTICE & HUMAN RIGHTS WITH TLC

TLC Newsletter | October 2023

Note from the Executive Director

With millions of people experiencing forced migration due to conflicts raging in the Middle East, Sudan, and Eastern Europe, it's easy to adopt a bleak worldview. It's in the stories of resistance and solidarity, where we find a measure of hope and faith in humanity. The examples are everywhere—from client stories like those below to the many incredible human rights workers and service providers we have the privilege to work alongside. As TLC has been assisting Maui residents in applying for replacement immigration documents lost in the fires, we've met survivors volunteering tirelessly to provide relief and resources for other Maui residents in need. We witnessed our partners at Pacific Gateway Center and Hawai'i Coalition for Immigrant Rights waste no time setting up a new immigrant resource center and multilingual hotline for Maui residents.

Earlier this month, TLC board president Corey Park and I had the opportunity to join our colleagues from the Immigration Legal Justice Network ([ILJN](#)) at a convening in Tennessee, where we learned how affiliates in New York and Chicago are engaging in rapid response strategies to triage the overwhelming needs of new immigrants being bussed from border states. At a member gathering of the National Partnership for New Americans ([NPNA](#)) in North Carolina, I was inspired by the innovative ways advocates are engaging in immigrant voter registration, policy work, and disaster relief efforts.

In the face of daunting crises and political strife, inspiring individuals and movements rise to fight for human rights and needed resources. Look for the resistance stories. Advocate for fair policies. Millions are seeking a better future against all odds, and so can we.

Keep the Faith,
Bettina Mok, The Legal Clinic



TLC staff and volunteers (Spanish-speaking) assist Maui fire survivors with U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services applications for replacement documents.



TLC director Bettina Mok, Pacific Gateway Center deputy director Terrina Wong, and TLC Engagement Coordinator Madeline Svengsouk visit the new Immigrant Resource Center office in Wailuku, Maui

Recent TLC Client Stories



Ukrainian family that came to TLC for help with green card applications.

Ukrainian Family Obtains Green Cards!

On February 24, 2022, the war in Ukraine forced my wife, our daughter, and me to flee our homeland. Seeking refuge, we initially traveled to Poland to stay with a friend for a month. During our stay, we learned of the opportunity for Ukrainians to seek a better life in America. After much discussion, our family decided to take the chance. Our journey began when we left Poland, flying to France, then to Mexico, and eventually reaching Tijuana. From there, we crossed the border into San Diego on foot, marking our arrival in the United States.

Through Facebook, we were able to connect with compassionate and generous individuals who offered to let us stay with them at their residence in Hawai'i. Before we fled from the war in Ukraine, I filled out an application for the diversity visa lottery. After relocating to Hawai'i, I discovered that I had been selected for the lottery! We tried applying for the green card on our own but were overwhelmed with the number of documents we needed to complete, so we turned to The Legal Clinic for assistance. We

were so glad we found them because we thought we had completed all the steps, but learned we were still missing the most important part of the application! Without The Legal Clinic's timely help in taking the final step, we would have lost our opportunity to get our green cards.

TLC's attorney, Omar Vaquerano, and legal assistant Lia Nakao handled our case with professionalism and provided invaluable guidance. When our family was scheduled for an interview with USCIS, Omar was by our side, diligently overseeing our case. Thanks to the assistance of The Legal Clinic, we were able to secure our green cards, opening the door to a brighter future.

Russian Protester Granted Asylum in Hawai'i Following Arduous Journey

Our client, a highly educated citizen of the Russian Federation from Siberia's Buryatia region, found himself at a crossroads. He had to make the difficult decision to leave Russia due to concerns for his safety, primarily stemming from his vocal criticism of the Russian government's policies. His decision was made after a peaceful picket protest against the Russian government's war in Ukraine, which led to his detainment by Russian authorities.



Buryatia region in red

He embarked on a challenging journey, traveling on foot through Mexico to reach the U.S. border, where he faced removal proceedings. He then went to Charlotte, North Carolina, where he encountered numerous obstacles, including a lack of support and difficulties navigating the process of applying for asylum. Eventually, he moved to Hawai'i, where he experienced homelessness and was even hit by a car, leaving him with injuries that required months of recovery.



Client not pictured for privacy. Photo credit: Atlantic Council

In Hawai'i, lacking the financial resources to secure legal representation, our client turned to The Legal Clinic (TLC) for assistance. After seven months of thorough preparation, TLC's attorney, Omar Vaquerano, presented his case before the Honolulu immigration court. The case was particularly challenging, as it hinged on the argument that our client faced a well-founded fear of future persecution, given that his prior detention in Russia was not severe enough to argue that the government's past actions rose to the level of persecution. TLC's attorney was able to successfully make this argument at the merits hearing, and the judge granted the client's asylum application. Our client now has access to essential benefits like cash assistance, housing, and employment opportunities. This achievement marks the beginning of a new chapter in his life with the possibility of lawful permanent resident status in the future.

[Read more here](#) about reported systemic oppression of indigenous and ethnic minority groups in Russia—including the disproportionate number of soldiers from the Buryatia region being sent to war.

Major Settlement in Family Separation Lawsuit Ms. L v. ICE

On October 16th, after years of negotiations, a [settlement](#) was reached in Ms. L., et al. v. ICE, et al., through which families who were separated at the U.S.-Mexico border under the inhumane zero-tolerance policy finally have answers on how their cases will proceed through the asylum process. Details of the settlement consolidated by the [ACLU](#):

- An estimated 4,500-5,000 children and their parents will be covered under this settlement.
 - The U.S. government will continue to identify families that were separated, fund their reunification in the U.S., and provide a pathway for them to seek asylum here.
 - Families will have access to benefits to get them on their feet, such as work authorization, housing and legal assistance, and behavioral health and medical services.
 - An essential component of the settlement is the government's agreement that it could not reenact the zero-tolerance policy moving forward.
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Connecting with Immigrant Justice Partners Nationally



Immigration Law & Justice Network affiliates from 19 organizations across the country gathered in Nashville, Tennessee for the annual Roundtable in early October. TLC's board president Corey Park and executive director Bettina Mok joined peers from around the country to discuss best practices in immigration legal service work, advocacy efforts, and organizational sustainability.

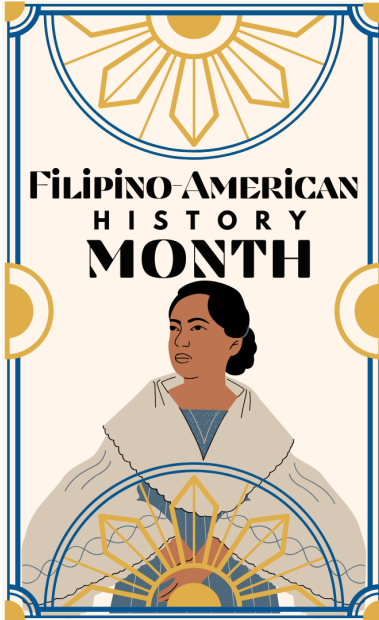


National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA) executive director Nicole Melaku welcomed immigrant justice advocates to Charleston, NC.



TLC's Bettina Mok speaks on securing government support for immigration legal services at the NPNA Summit.

Celebrating Filipino American Heritage Month with TLC! 🌟💙



As we commemorate Filipino American History Month this October, The Legal Clinic wishes to reaffirm our commitment to equal rights for the vibrant Filipino-American community in Hawai'i, which makes up nearly half of the immigrant population in the state. We are particularly proud to have two outstanding Filipina community leaders—Amy Agbayani and Agnes Malate—serving on TLC's board, and to have the support of members of Hawai'i's Filipino legislative caucus when it comes to sponsoring immigrant justice bills. This month and year-round, we honor the history of Filipino-American resilience and democratic movement building in Hawai'i and beyond!

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