

PATH TO CITIZENSHIP

2017 Annual Report

STEERING COMMITTEE

Rev. Laura Arnold and Lorraine Borowski, *Congregational United Church of Christ*

Dave Carlson and Carol Birkland, *First Lutheran Church*

Kathi Mitchell and Barb Dale, *First United Methodist Church*

David Judisch and Kate Narveson, *Good Shepherd Lutheran Church*

Megan Strom, *Luther College*

Luther College Student Congregation

Jim McIntosh, *Northeast Iowa Unitarian Universalist Fellowship*

Ruth Palmer, *St. Benedict Catholic Community*

Julie Fischer, *Northeast Iowa Peace and Justice Center, Inc.*

WHO WE ARE

PATH TO CITIZENSHIP is a northeast Iowa organization whose mission is to aid people who need help navigating the complicated path of immigration. Founded by a coalition of Decorah area faith groups and working in partnership with Justice for Our Neighbors (JFON), a national United Methodist group, Path to Citizenship provides free legal advice on the immigration process. With the help of JFON attorneys, we hold quarterly legal aid clinics, with appointments available for ten clients at each clinic. We also have a microloan fund for costs associated with the citizenship process.

In 2016, our work was expanded with the opening in Decorah of the Archdiocese of Dubuque Catholic Charities office of immigration attorney, Yer Vang. She has offered legal information sessions in months opposite JFON clinics and serves clients, especially unaccompanied minors, in northeast Iowa.

WHY WE CAME TOGETHER

Our community is made up of immigrants and the children of immigrants. In the first hundred years of immigration to our community, primarily by Europeans, very few rules governed who could settle here from other parts of the world. Since WWI, the government has placed more and more restrictions on immigration, yet many people still come, even without legal status, seeking safety and security for their families, political freedom, and economic opportunity. Current laws allow some new immigrants to start on a path to legal residency. For some, the path leads to legal permanent residence, while for others, it allows a period of respite from violence and war in their home countries and the opportunity to pursue education or work, free from the fear of deportation.

The good news: with just a little support, some immigrants can follow the path, gaining security for their families and hope for their children. Our legal aid clinics and microloan fund can make the difference, giving people just the boost they need.



Legal Aid Clinics

During 2014, we established a framework to provide quarterly legal aid clinics. We quickly realized immigration law is mind-boggling in its complexity even for attorneys, and with no immigration attorneys in northeast Iowa, we were fortunate to learn of JFON. As one of now seven Iowa JFON locations, we offer quarterly clinics at no charge to eligible clients. JFON provides immigration lawyers and other expert staff, while we provide the physical space, funding, and an amazing volunteer staff.

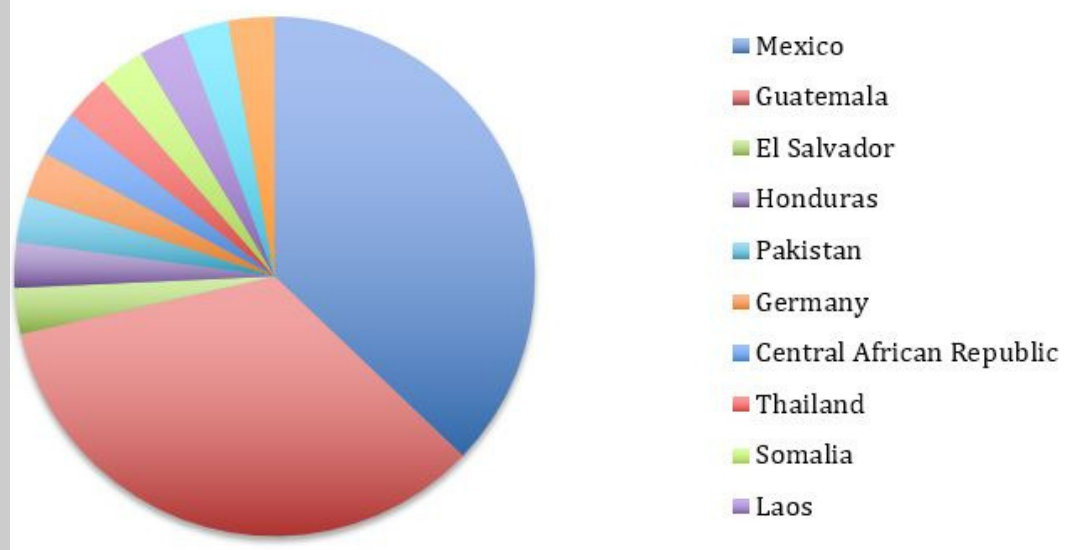
60
individuals
from **13**
countries

In 2016, we held eight clinics. Over the year, our immigration attorneys met with 60 clients from 13 different countries. We also conducted information sessions and volunteer trainings. At the clinics, trained volunteers helped with hospitality, child care, interpretation, intake interviews, and initial guidance through paperwork before the clients meet with the attorneys.

Future quarterly clinics will be held at Decorah First United Methodist Church on
February 10 August 11
May 12 November 10

Catholic Charities Immigration Services will offer legal information sessions on an as needed basis in between JFON clinics and meet clients individually as scheduled in the Decorah office. The first information session was held February 3 in Postville to help vulnerable immigrants set up safety plans for their households.

**2016 JFON Clincs Decorah --
47 Clients from 13 Countries**



Microloan

The second part of our mission is a microloan fund to aid with immigration fees and other expenses associated with the legal process, such as travel to court hearings, fees for mandatory physical examinations, and costs of other documentation.

Modeled on the highly successful Guatemalan Resettlement Microloan Program, which has helped young people in the aftermath of the Postville immigration raid and which has a 100% repayment rate, this fund offers small loans for basic costs such as filing fees, travel expenses, and (in some cases) legal fees. The loans, at no interest for one year, are normally in the \$500 - \$1000 range.

Funded with an initial grant from the Catholic Charities Campaign for Human Development, the program has offered two loans this year. It is managed in cooperation with the Northeast Iowa Peace and Justice Center in Decorah.

A new future for two teens

Fleeing the murderous streets of their home in Guatemala, two teens, Jorge and Manuel (names changed to protect confidentiality), made their way to northeast Iowa to rejoin family members. They were two of the thousands of unaccompanied minors who sought refuge from being forced to join the violent gangs who control many cities in Honduras and Guatemala, and therefore Jorge and Manuel were eligible for the SIJS (Special Immigrant Juvenile Status) program. But they needed a guardian who was a US citizen.

Enter Kathi Mitchell, one of the mainstays of Path to Citizenship. Kathi agreed to serve as legal guardian. While the boys live with family members, Kathi visits them a couple times a month, transports them to legal and other appointments, and closely follows their academic progress. Kathi also loves to attend their school sporting events, as both boys have excelled in track, soccer, and American football.

Kathi reflects that while in Guatemala, the boys just tried to stay alive, but now they have a future. Now that they have their green cards, giving them legal permanent residency, she's looking forward to visiting colleges this spring, and to both boys' high school graduation in May 2018. Jorge would like to become a teacher and Manuel to pursue a profession that involves art.

Northeast Iowa has a high concentration of unaccompanied minors and Kathi is committed to showing these children they are loved and that they matter. As Jorge and Manuel continue steps toward citizenship, she is ready to begin the journey anew with the next youth. "It's what the Bible commands us to do."

Jorge and Manuel are one success story among the many that Path to Citizenship has made possible this past year.

Fundraising

Fundraising goals for our first two years were met. The past year saw increasing numbers of unaccompanied minor children from Central America. Given the 50-100 hours of legal help needed for each child, the annual amount of funding needed for the coming year is \$14,000.

We are reaching out to congregations throughout the area and exploring grant possibilities from both foundations and local businesses that benefit from immigrant labor. We would also like to expand the microloan fund.

Unaccompanied Minors

The financial need is pressing. Iowa JFON has identified over 100 unaccompanied minor children in Iowa, and the Decorah JFON clinic has worked with 20 of them. Path to Citizenship has also gone beyond the JFON services to find legal guardians for six of the minors, to provide transportation to the required court interviews and appearances in Omaha and Des Moines, and to provide Catholic Charities counselor services for the families.

While several foundation grant requests are in process, we also depend heavily on support from churches and individuals.

THANK YOU!

We'd like to recognize the volunteer coordinators whose energy and skill made our clinics possible. Many thanks!

Clinic Coordinator:
Kathi Mitchell, Ruth Palmer

Interpretation Coordinator:
Megan Strom

Hospitality Coordinator:
Barb Dale

Thanks also to the over 60 volunteers who helped out at our clinics, giving over 285 hours of service!

To make client appointments,

- call JFON 515 255-9809 for appointments at the quarterly JFON clinics,
- or call Yer Vang, Catholic Charities immigration attorney, at 563 382-1231, for local appointment
- text Kathi Mitchell in English or Spanish at 563 419-6795,

Please send contributions to:

**Path to Citizenship
PO Box 382
Decorah, IA 52101**

For questions,
call Ruth Palmer at 563 379-6777