

# IOWA IMMIGRATION LEGAL PROJECT

*A non-profit legal services corporation*

*"Providing immigration legal assistance and advocacy for Iowa's immigrants and employers"*

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Vision: To establish a single non-partisan non-profit entity to spearhead and coordinate immigrant work force development in Iowa

Focus: Developing immigration as a partial solution to Iowa's long-term work force needs

Goal: To provide Iowa with a well-planned high-quality reliable center for information and services to Iowa's businesses, immigrant workers and their families, service providers, and governmental entities in immigration issues

Methods: Gather data, develop legislative proposals, coordinate with other states, provide affordable immigration legal services and training, provide information and referrals to both businesses and immigrant workers and their families, publish immigration/business-related information through a Web page and regular newsletter, provide referrals and coordination between other service providers and immigrants and businesses and governmental entities

## Advantages:

- Single contact point for government, business, service providers, and immigrant workers and their families
- Familiar with immigration laws and issues
- Coordinate and integrate the development of legislative programs and initiatives
- Coordinate with other states on immigration worker/business issues
- Provide single contact for Mexican and other foreign governments to work with to facilitate their services to their citizens within Iowa
- Provide/facilitate affordable competent low-cost/no-cost immigration legal services to immigrant workers and their families
- Three prong approach:
  1. Workers: Affordable immigration legal services and information
  2. Businesses: Information, work force development, coordination
  3. Government: Program development, legislative initiatives, liaison with immigrants/immigrant groups and other governmental entities

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February 1, 2001

Iowa State Legislature  
State Capital Building  
Des Moines, IA 50319

Re: Pre-Proposal Letter

## Overview

Immigration is changing the face of Iowa, enriching its communities, schools, and especially its labor force. At present, these new immigrants do not have a single, comprehensive center to provide services unique to their needs. As a result, the majority of Iowa's immigrants are vastly under-served, especially in the area of immigration legal services. At the same time, Iowa has a remarkably low unemployment rate, while Iowa's employers find their need for all kinds of labor expanding. *This situation provides a unique opportunity for the creation of an entity to handle contacts and coordination between these two groups, as well as services to smooth the transition of immigrants into Iowa society.*

The vision for the **Iowa Immigration Legal Project** grew out of the overwhelming need for a single comprehensive center to provide services, both legal and otherwise, to Iowa's growing immigrant population, as well as providing a unique resource for Iowa's employers to assist in fulfilling their workforce needs.

The Project is designed as a two-prong approach:

1) Building connections with existing service providers to immigrant communities, expanding their services to include much-needed immigration law expertise, as well as coordinating their efforts more effectively.

2) Building connections with Iowa businesses who employ, or need to employ, newly arrived workers to assure both employer and employee that all legal regulations have been met, and to assist Iowa employers in meeting their workforce needs.

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2912 Beaver Avenue, Des Moines, Iowa 50310-4040  
phone 271-5730; fax 271-5757

## **Immigration Services Division: Serving Iowa's newest workers**

It is universally agreed that the greatest service needed for immigrants is for low-cost/no cost competent legal immigration services. Many immigrants need help with their naturalization documents, renewing their employment authorization cards, getting their spouse or family in the United States, or otherwise obtaining competent legal assistance on immigration matters. However, many of these same immigrants are extremely fearful that they will be turned over the Immigration and Naturalization Service for deportation, or will be arrested if they attempt to seek assistance through an official agency, such as the Iowa Workforce Development or the INS itself.

There are already numerous agencies, both public and private, providing services to immigrants in health, housing, school, English as a Second Language, child care, food, employment, interpreting and similar services. These agencies are already staffed and have the necessary resources and contacts within their local communities. There is no need to duplicate the services already offered. However, the various non-profit organizations around the state currently serving immigrants do not have any statewide coordination. Nor is there any statewide office for general immigration legal assistance or referrals.

Networking with the non-profit immigration service providers already in place provides even greater utility and efficiency for present resources. The **Iowa Immigration Legal Project** sees as one of its first tasks to develop a state-wide list of immigration service providers, with an inventory of services offered by each such service provider. These services may include such items as English as Second Language classes, free medical clinics, interpreter services, housing assistance, employment services, and any of the other myriad of services necessary for immigrants in a new land.

A survey of service provider organizations shows that the need for immigration legal services is by far the greatest need of Iowa's immigrant population. Wayne Johnson, director of the Iowa Bureau of Refugees, recently indicated that competent immigration legal services is the "core" service need for immigrants, including refugees, in Iowa. This need is echoed by Iowa employers in their struggle to fill positions in their workplace.

The Iowa Immigration Legal Project was recently recognized by the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) to provide low-cost or no-cost immigration legal services. The Iowa Immigration Legal Project is already providing legal immigration training to personnel from the various non-profit agencies. The Project will then provide ongoing support services, legal technical assistance, and regular on-site case review and supervision by an experienced immigration attorney. The Project's immigration attorney will make sure that proper reference materials are available, and that each immigration legal service provider is properly trained and knowledgeable regarding immigration law and immigration case management. They will then be able to provide basic low-cost/no cost legal immigration services to Iowa's immigrants. Pursuant to federal regulation 8 C.F.R. 292.2, these non-profits may only charge nominal fees. Further, they must waive fees for any applicant who cannot afford them.

The IILP will work to coordinate services and information among the various immigration service providers throughout Iowa. In this manner, the various immigration service providers will be able to share information among themselves, as well as sharing what programs work,

what resources are available, and providing cross referrals to each other depending on need and location. This will immeasurably strengthen each organization's ability to provide assistance to their community.

The Iowa Immigration Legal Project is designed to be a coordinating center for issues facing immigrants in Iowa: an information clearing house and referral service for immigrants on such items as housing, employment, medical services, ESL classes, public school issues, and the myriad of other information needed by immigrants to Iowa. Our vision, already beginning to take shape, is to form these existing providers throughout Iowa into *affiliate offices* of the Project. Their services will be expanded to address the need for competent immigration legal services, and will include legal assistance in employment authorization, eligibility for immigration benefits, citizenship, and liaison with the INS. Part of the mission of the Iowa Immigration Legal Project will be to provide a central referral service to both immigrants and others on immigration matters throughout the state. A toll-free number will be installed. Bilingual staff members will be available to assist.

These satellite offices are mostly staffed by women, generally of an ethnic and/or national minority. These women staff the various non-profits, as well as provide some direct immigration legal services to immigrants in their communities. Several of these women are starting their own immigration legal service projects in their local area. The Project will assist these local non-profit immigration service providers on legal issues relating to their organization such as filing under Iowa's non-profit corporation statute, and obtaining tax exempt status pursuant to the IRS Code section 501(c)(3).

#### **Business Services Division: Developing Iowa's workforce in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

A major goal of the Iowa Immigration Legal Project is to ensure legally authorized workers for Iowa's employers, who face a serious labor shortage in an expanding economy. In addition to working as a source of both information and referrals to the various non-profits, the Project will also work in this capacity for various state governmental agencies and for Iowa businesses and trade associations. Due to the serious labor shortage and the relatively massive influx of recent immigrants to Iowa, there is a critical need for such information management and coordination.

The Iowa Immigration Legal Project will work with business to expand and enrich Iowa's workforce by providing competent immigration legal services to Iowa's immigrant population, and assistance on immigration issues to Iowa employers. Through its affiliate and main offices, the Project will assist businesses in I-9 compliance issues, liaison with INS on employment issues and employees' immigration status, and answer employers' questions on immigration matters. Iowa's employers will also benefit from their immigrant employees' enhanced access to legal and other services provided by the Project's affiliate offices.

The Project is already working with employers to develop initiatives to facilitate Iowa's commercial growth, while maintaining its quality of life. The Project is working with employers to provide a forum on immigration workforce needs in Iowa. The Project has sponsored several meetings between Iowa business leaders and state government officials, including from Iowa Department of Workforce Development, Iowa Dept of Economic Development, Iowa Commission of Latino Affairs, and the governor's office. Additionally, the Project has the

support of the Greater Des Moines Area Chamber of Commerce, and is actively working with these business leaders to address Iowa's workforce shortage through immigration. Response to the Project's vision has been tremendous within the business community.

Due to its statewide presence and contacts with the various immigration groups throughout Iowa, the Project can also serve as a contact point for other entities. For example, on a recent trip to Iowa, the deputy ambassador from Mexico indicated that Mexico would like to be able to work with its nationals living in Iowa. However, due to the multiplicity of organizations and the lack of any statewide entity, the deputy ambassador indicated that the Mexican government was simply unable to work effectively in Iowa.

The present Director of the Project, James Benzoni, has had ongoing contact with the Mexican consulate in Chicago. The consulate sometimes requests pro bono services when one of its nationals is involved with Iowa authorities. The possibilities for cooperation on the issues affecting Mexican nationals and other national groups on a statewide basis is greatly enhanced by the presence of a statewide immigration advocacy service provider.

The Project hopes to become mainly self-funding within the next three to five years. In addition to generation of small fees for immigration legal services, the Project anticipates sizeable grants from Iowa businesses needing assistance with workforce development and immigration legal issues as they develop an immigrant labor base.

### **Additional Services**

The Project has given numerous free presentations to immigrants throughout Iowa. These presentations are open to the public free of charge. They are generally held at a church or other non-profit service provider with whom local immigrants are already familiar. These free seminars are very well attended, sometimes having as many as two or three hundred people present. General immigration legal issues are addressed. Following the formal presentation, individual attendants are able to speak with an immigration attorney free of charge regarding their individual immigration situation. Frequently their problems can be satisfactorily resolved simply by clarifying their status or reviewing their papers. More complex cases are referred for some kind of action.

These immigration seminars have proved extremely popular. There are repeated demands for these throughout Iowa. They are especially popular following church on Sunday as the immigrants generally are not working on Sunday afternoons, and the entire family can attend. These immigration seminars are translated. At times, two languages are being translated simultaneously from English, such as Spanish and Vietnamese.

More of these general information seminars are needed. Many of the immigrants' legal issues can be addressed without a private appointment with an immigration legal service provider. Many questions involve do with INS backlogs, renewal of employment authorization cards or permanent legal resident cards, or applying for naturalization. Such questions are extremely perplexing to the immigrant, especially as they are unfamiliar with the immigration legal system. Moreover, such questions are frequently held by many persons in the same audience. The public immigration seminar provides a means to answer these questions in a friendly atmosphere, without fear of immigration enforcement.

The Iowa Immigration Legal Project also envisions providing educational resources, including speakers, seminars and workshops, to Iowa communities. ***The ultimate goal of the Iowa Immigration Legal Project is the smooth, positive integration of Iowa's newest residents into Iowa society.***

### **Existing Resources**

James Benzoni, an attorney specializing in immigration law, is the current Director of the Iowa Immigration Legal Project. Offices, including telephone, fax, and copy facilities, are available.

An intensive one-week immigration legal training course for non-profit immigration service providers has already occurred during September 2000. Another is already being planned for January 2001, as response has been significant. Additionally, tuition is being charged for those participants able to afford it. A \$10,000 grant is being sought from the State of Iowa to scholarship those unable to afford the tuition for the one-week intensive training seminar.

### **Funding Sought**

It is estimated that approximately **\$200,000** is necessary to fund to implement the **Iowa Immigration Legal Project** for the **first year** of full implementation. The Project has been three to four years in the making and is now ready to begin active wide-scale operations. The Project is seeking funds to hire a full-time program/development director and a bilingual executive assistant. Additionally, funds for the first year's operating expenses are necessary. These expenses will include office expenses, telephone, legal materials and travel costs for an immigration attorney to travel to each site.

The impact of the Project will be tremendous. Because of the multiplying effect of utilizing pre-existing non-profit service agencies, a significant cost savings would be achieved in avoiding duplication of resources and utilizing those already in existence. The Project would not need to provide staff to these local non-profit service centers, but only training, supervision and legal reference materials, and on-going immigration legal support.

The Project is a unique partnership among several Iowa non-profit service providers, organizations and churches. By coordinating their efforts on a statewide basis, the Project will provide in-depth immigration legal services, as well as a single, comprehensive statewide resource, to those most in need. The Project is presently seeking to move forward with active provision of services.

If you have any questions, please call. Thank you for your consideration of our proposal.

Respectfully,

Bill Scott, President  
Board of Directors