

Immigration Legal Services ministry helps woman become U.S. citizen



By Jill Kruse-Domeyer
Witness Editorial Assistant

DUBUQUE — It was a milestone that meant a lot to Liliana Peterson. On May 24 of last year, Peterson, an immigrant to the United States, became an American citizen at a ceremony held in Cedar Rapids.

But U.S. citizenship was an achievement that might not have been possible for Peterson had it not been for the assistance she received from Immigration Legal Services (ILS), a program of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Dubuque.

“Thanks to Immigration Legal Services, I was able to complete that big step,” she said. “It means a lot to me that they’re there to help immigrants.”

Peterson, 29, was born in Mexico but moved to Texas when she was 13 years old to live with her mother, who had immigrated to the U.S. earlier. As an adult, and while still living in Texas, Peterson met the man who would become her husband, and the two eventually moved to Iowa, her husband’s home state.

While Peterson was a lawful permanent resident, she wished to become a U.S. citizen but discovered that the naturalization process was expensive and cost more than she could afford. Of gaining citizenship, Peterson said, “It’s hard to get to it. And when I was so close, I found out I didn’t have the resources to pay the money to complete that important step.”

She explored her options and learned about Catholic Charities’ Immigration Legal Services. “They came up with a very reasonable price that I could afford,” she said.

The staff of Immigration Legal Services provides immigrants with consultations at no cost, believing that all individuals should have access to free legal information and to know what their legal options are, whether Immigration Legal Services is ultimately able to assist them or not. For eligible immigrants who pass a screening process and whose cases are accepted, services are offered on a sliding fee scale based on their household income.



Liliana Peterson, an immigrant from Mexico who now lives in Dubuque, obtained U.S. citizenship with the aid of attorneys from Catholic Charities. Peterson poses with the judge at her citizenship ceremony held in Cedar Rapids on May 24, 2019. (Contributed photo)

Peterson said she is grateful for the help she received. “I believe in God,” she said, “and I know he was the one who put in my path Catholic Charities.”

Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Dubuque has been providing services to immigrants like Peterson for about the past decade, with the current Immigration Legal Services program having been formalized approximately five years ago. The program includes four attorneys with offices in Cedar Rapids, Waterloo and Dubuque. One of those attorneys, Yer Vang, also serves as the program’s director.

Vang, whose own family fled its homeland of Laos in the wake of the Vietnam War, was herself born in a refugee camp in Southeast Asia. She and her family were resettled in Iowa when she was 4 years old. Vang said that her family’s refugee experience imparted on her the power of a helping hand.

“I think when you’ve gone through that personal experience yourself, it really sheds light on the importance of why you want to be able to help other immigrants and refugees navigate that same path,” she said.

ILS provides immigrants with a variety of family-based and humanitarian legal services. Some of the most common services offered include legal assistance with applications for green cards, citizenship, work permits, and spouse or family reunification. The humanitarian-based services include legal assistance to unaccompanied minors and asylum seekers.

Many immigrant clients seek help from ILS in extending existing documents to maintain or renew a recognized

legal status. Other immigrants do not have a visa but are eligible for one but are unsure of how to apply. Immigration Legal Services can assist them along a legal pathway to permanent residency and possibly even citizenship.

There are also unaccompanied minors living in the archdiocese who qualify for a visa, even though they may not have had a visa to enter the country. U.S. laws allow them to obtain legal status provided they have a legal guardian in the United States and meet other eligibility requirements.

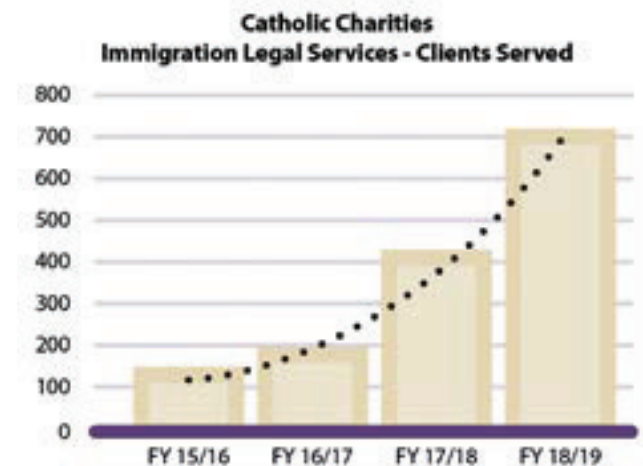
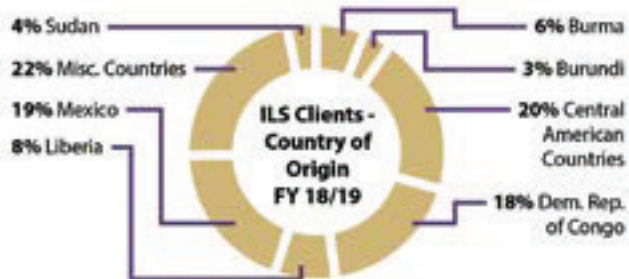
For some clients, Immigration Legal Services may be able to help obtain relief from deportation while visa and legal status applications are pending.

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— Yer Vang, Immigration Legal Services director

Vang said she knows that immigration can be a controversial topic, and she believes there is often a misconception about the work Immigration Legal Services does. “The truth of the matter is,” she said, “what we’re trying to do is help immigrants, whether they’re undocumented or documented, reunify and keep families together. And the law provides that for us.”

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She said the staff of Immigration Legal Services is always open and transparent in all the work they do, and any of the help they provide individuals and families in navigating immigration processes is done in a completely lawful manner.

“And, actually,” Vang added, “a fair number of our clients are citizens who want to reunite with family members from abroad. Helping all our neighbors with their immigration process — that’s essentially what this is. The bulk of the work that we do is really about keeping families together and how do we help family members reunify with those who have been separated by immigration policies and laws.”

In addition to helping clients and their families directly, ILS also does a great deal of outreach in the form of educational workshops, so immigrants and community members in general are aware of the latest immigration updates and changes and what rights are available for immigrants.

Immigration Legal Services was chosen as one of the four beneficiaries of the ArchdioceseOne appeal.

Vang said the Archdiocese of Dubuque has the largest number of immigrants in the state because of its large geographic size, and the need for legal services to assist them is great. In fiscal year 2019 alone, ILS was able to serve 713 clients and reached more than 1,400 people in its outreach activities, but an even greater need for immigration services exists in the archdiocese. Currently, there

are long wait-lists for initial consultations and many more communities in need of services.

Funds raised through the appeal will allow Immigration Legal Services to hire more staff and to increase the program’s capacity to help more immigrants. Since the fees ILS charges do not cover the program’s basic operating costs, appeal funds will also help pay for such things as office rent, travel, postage, phone bills and other necessary supplies. “It’s about sustaining this program for the next 10-plus years,” Vang said.

The ILS director said she believes it is important that Catholic Charities continues to offer programs like Immigration Legal Services. “The tenants of our Catholic social teaching principles tell us, instruct us and encourage us to welcome the stranger,” she said, adding that it is about putting “faith in action” and being the “arms and feet of Christ.”

Vang said she believes assisting immigrants is not only the morally right thing to do, but that it also benefits society as a whole to offer the support. “We have to, as Americans, as Catholics, as people of faith, to be compassionate and empathetic and to try to help in the best way that we can,” Vang said. By helping “our brothers or sisters in need,” she said, these immigrants are able to stabilize their lives and better integrate and more easily contribute back to the places where they live and work, which “just makes our community and country stronger.”

Immigration Legal Services is a financial beneficiary of a special appeal, which we are calling ArchdioceseOne, to help the poor and to support the mission of the Church.

As the special appeal unfolds, each of us will be invited to help secure the future for mission-related needs.

To learn more about ArchdioceseOne beneficiaries, including answers to frequently asked questions, visit www.ArchdioceseOne.org or call the Stewardship Development office at the Archdiocesan Pastoral Center at 800-876-3546.