

**CULTIVATE • MOBILIZE • AMPLIFY**



# Immigration Affairs

2023 Annual Report

**Dane County Department of Human Services**

**Prevention & Early Intervention**

# Our Story

The Dane County Department of Human Services established the Immigration Affairs (IA) program in 2017 to better serve the growing immigrant and refugee population in Dane County. IA serves people presenting with immigration related needs with varying legal status. IA navigates the complex immigration process to gain or maintain legal status and link clients to services and resources to address their basic human needs. IA has four fulltime staff members – a Supervisor, two bilingual Spanish Social Workers and one bilingual Spanish Social Service Specialist.



IA is a unique initiative in Wisconsin in that it is a county government immigration program serving as a central intake point for immigrants. It provides a social work case management response and coordination of local services and resources with other organizations.

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*Immigration Affairs addresses the needs of immigrants, asylum-seekers, refugees, and the undocumented.*

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The need for these services in Wisconsin and Dane County is high and increasing. In Wisconsin, the immigrant and refugee communities are composed of approximately 300,000 immigrants (foreign-born) that comprise 5% of the Wisconsin population – 48,000 reside in Dane County and make up 9% of the Dane County population. The most common countries of origin for Wisconsin immigrants are Mexico, India, China, Laos, and Philippines. As of 2018, 142,489 immigrants (48%) have become naturalized; with more than 50,000 immigrants still eligible to become naturalized U.S. citizens. Of the entire Wisconsin population, 315,683 people (5%) are native-born who have at least one immigrant parent and are referred to as “mixed-status families.” Approximately 75,000 immigrants in Wisconsin are undocumented and 6,540 are active DACA recipients. About 10,000 immigrants were immediately eligible for DACA under 2012 rules. <sup>1</sup>

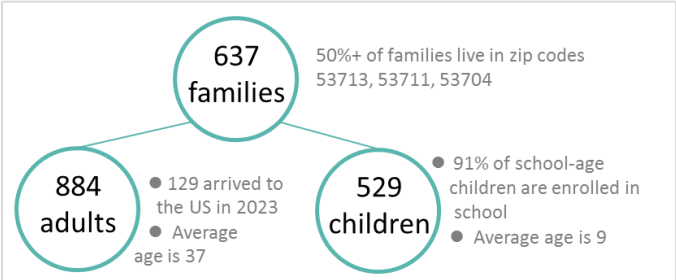
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<sup>1</sup> “Immigrants in Wisconsin,” Map the Impact, American Immigration Council, accessed June 28, 2024, <https://map.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/locations/wisconsin/>.

# People Served in 2023

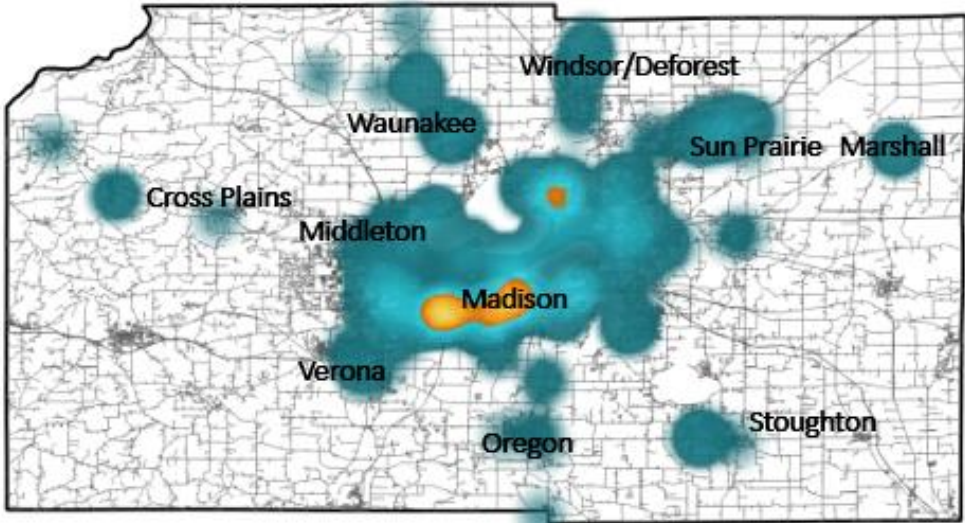
## Number of people

During 2023, Immigration Affairs saw an increase in its caseload, assisting an average of 53 families per month and a total of 637 families for the year. This represented a 17% increase to the 544 families served in 2022.



## Location in Dane County

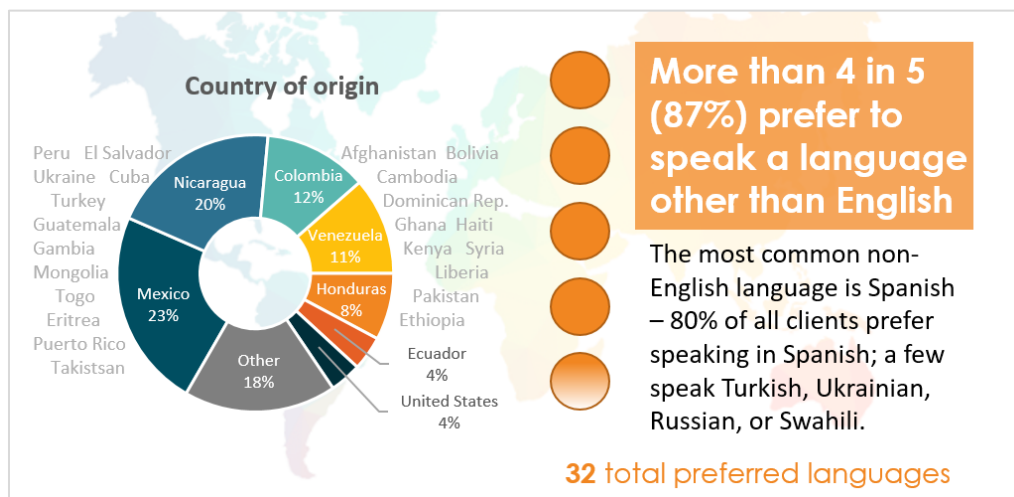
Immigration Affairs serves all of Dane County, but finds that people seeking IA services are concentrated in a few areas. The majority of clients reside in Madison. Other primary areas of residence include Middleton, Sun Prairie, and Verona. There has been an increasing need for immigration services from residents in Waunakee, Marshall, Stoughton, Oregon, and Windsor/DeForest. We anticipate an increased demand for immigration services in the next few years.



## Country of origin and language

Immigration Affairs works with clients from a myriad of different countries many of whom struggle to adjust to life in the United States. In these scenarios, IA supports individuals and families in a culturally and linguistically sensitive manner. All IA staff are bicultural and bilingual in Spanish. They understand the difficulties involved in these transitions having lived experience as immigrants in Dane County.

In 2023, the majority of IA clients were from Mexico, Nicaragua, and Colombia, followed by Venezuela and Honduras. Other clients receiving services came from Afghanistan, Cambodia, Turkey, Togo, and Pakistan.

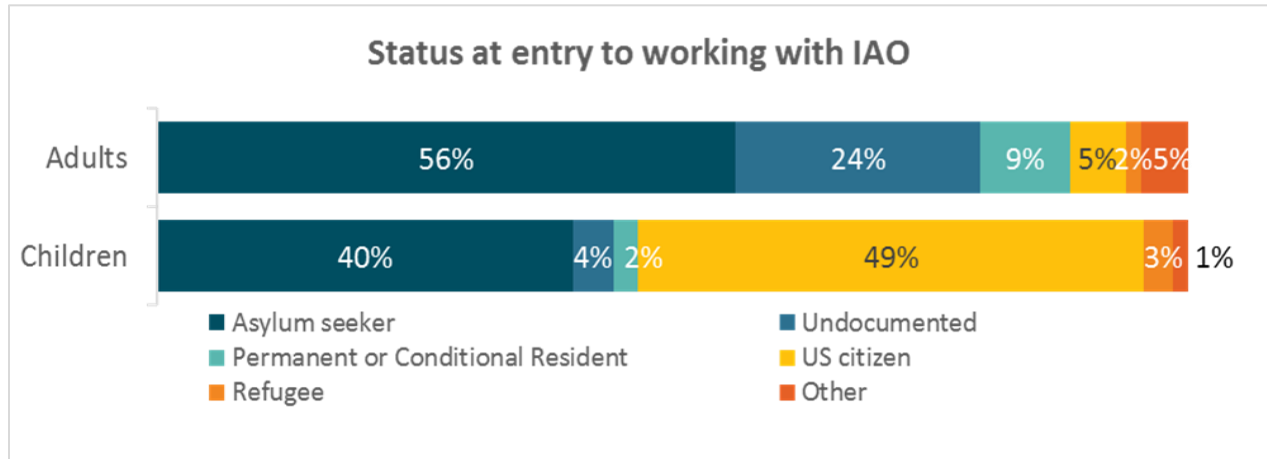


*Serving clients in their preferred language is a matter of civil rights, respect, and dignity. It is the only way to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services.*

In 2023, 87% of the IA clients preferred to speak a language other than English. The majority of clients speak Spanish and are monolingual. IA meets the needs of clients who do not speak English or Spanish through interpretive services, primarily using the language line including Russian, Swahili, Turkish, and many more. IA is a champion for language equity across all of Dane County Human Services, being actively involved in Department efforts to improve language access.

## Immigration status, client challenges & service connections

In 2023, IA worked with immigrants and refugees with a variety of statuses such as asylees, refugees, undocumented immigrants, legal permanent and conditional residents, and U.S. citizens. IA connects clients with immigration private attorneys and pays for their initial consultations, which determine the client’s immigration status. As indicated below, a majority of adults served by IA are asylum seekers; approximately a quarter are undocumented. One-half (49%) of children served by IA were U.S. citizens with slightly less (40%) having asylee status.



The stress experienced and reported by families and individuals who work with IA is immense. Being an immigrant can make a person incredibly vulnerable. Immigrants do not have access to the same benefits and support as United States citizens. Some immigrants have a distrust of support systems preventing them from asking for help. This makes times of uncertainty even harder for immigrants to navigate. Community partners are looking to focus on this emerging trend to reduce the negative impact that stress can have on an individual’s mental health.



More specifically, IA is seeing a need to develop supports for immigrants with regard to a variety of issues and situations. This includes: lack of a safety net, including health coverage; the absence of a support network; challenging family dynamics involving children; job loss; domestic violence; loss of a head of household, and other volatile situations. While these issues have always been a challenge, the stress is now exacerbated by the current political climate. Finding ways to further support clients through these circumstances is a focus for IA and its partners.

IA collaborates with other service providers to meet client needs. For example, IA has worked with clients seeking asylum since 2021. They usually do not have support or legal representation for their asylum case. IA connects individuals to legal services and attorneys. Often this population experiences homelessness and does not have health insurance and work permits. To fill the gap, IA coordinates services with partner organizations to address client needs. This could entail help with housing assistance and employment. It could involve physical and mental health assistance including specific assessments that are required for immigration processing to move forward.

Managing Attorney, Aissa Olivarez, at Community Immigration Law Center (CILC) explains the impact of the partnership between CILC and Immigration Affairs:

*“Working alongside Immigration Affairs as a law firm has made it possible for us to provide the holistic services we strive for in our service to all clients. Our clients deserve dignity in all areas of their life alongside CILCs zealous advocacy, IAO provides them with access to important resources that make this possible.” – Aissa Olivarez*







# Asylum

More than one-half (56%) of adults served by Immigration Affairs in 2023 entered the United States seeking asylum. Asylum seekers currently do not have access to affordable immigration legal services. Statistically, only one out of every ten asylum seekers win their case. With representation, nearly half are successful. Currently, asylum seekers in Dane County are forced to decide between paying a private attorney or continuing their immigration case without legal representation. Dane County is in dire need of pro-bono or low-bono immigration legal representation that focuses on asylum.



In July 2020, IA recognized the need for asylum seeker services in Dane County. IA partnered with CILC and Centro Hispano to write a successful proposal to establish monthly asylum orientations to provide asylum seekers with information and support regarding the next steps they need to take in their asylum journey. Consequently, many asylum-seekers have been able to receive orientations, consult with an immigration attorney, and access assistance through the CILC Pro Se Clinic. Our efforts have provided much needed services for this rapidly growing population in Dane County.

	Confirm and request an appointment with the Milwaukee ICE Field Office.
	Coordinate transportation through the Dane County Sanctuary Coalition to attend immigration related appointments.
	Change of Address with ICE Field Office & the EOIR Immigration Court.
	Change of Venue (in cases of emergency).

Asylum seekers have complex needs and IA staff pivot to effectively respond. This is especially true with regard to filing changes of venue and changes of address, where assistance is generally not available from other service providers. Seeing that gap, IA staff provide this service. Another area of success is coordinating transportation for clients to get to immigration-related appointments. In 2023, IA requested 161 rides for asylum seekers – 102 were fulfilled.

# Case Scenarios

Immigration Affairs is changing lives of individuals and families. One emerging trend is seeing more minority age immigrants coming to Dane County without any family; they arrive alone. IA is strengthening its expertise in helping Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) youth by referring and working with immigration attorneys to assist these young immigrants.

## Immigration Affairs helped an unaccompanied minor find a path to stability

IA supported a 17-year-old unaccompanied minor who was living on his own. This youth was in high school and working after school to cover his living expenses. IA connected the minor with an immigration attorney who determined he was eligible for a Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) petition. With support from IA staff and the attorney, the teen got on track to petition for a SIJ, which will allow him to obtain a lawful permanent residency in the future.



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*Strong partnerships allow Immigration Affairs to keep families on track with their often long and complicated paths to lawful residence.*

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## Immigration Affairs collaborated with partners to keep a family of six on a path towards becoming lawful permanent residents

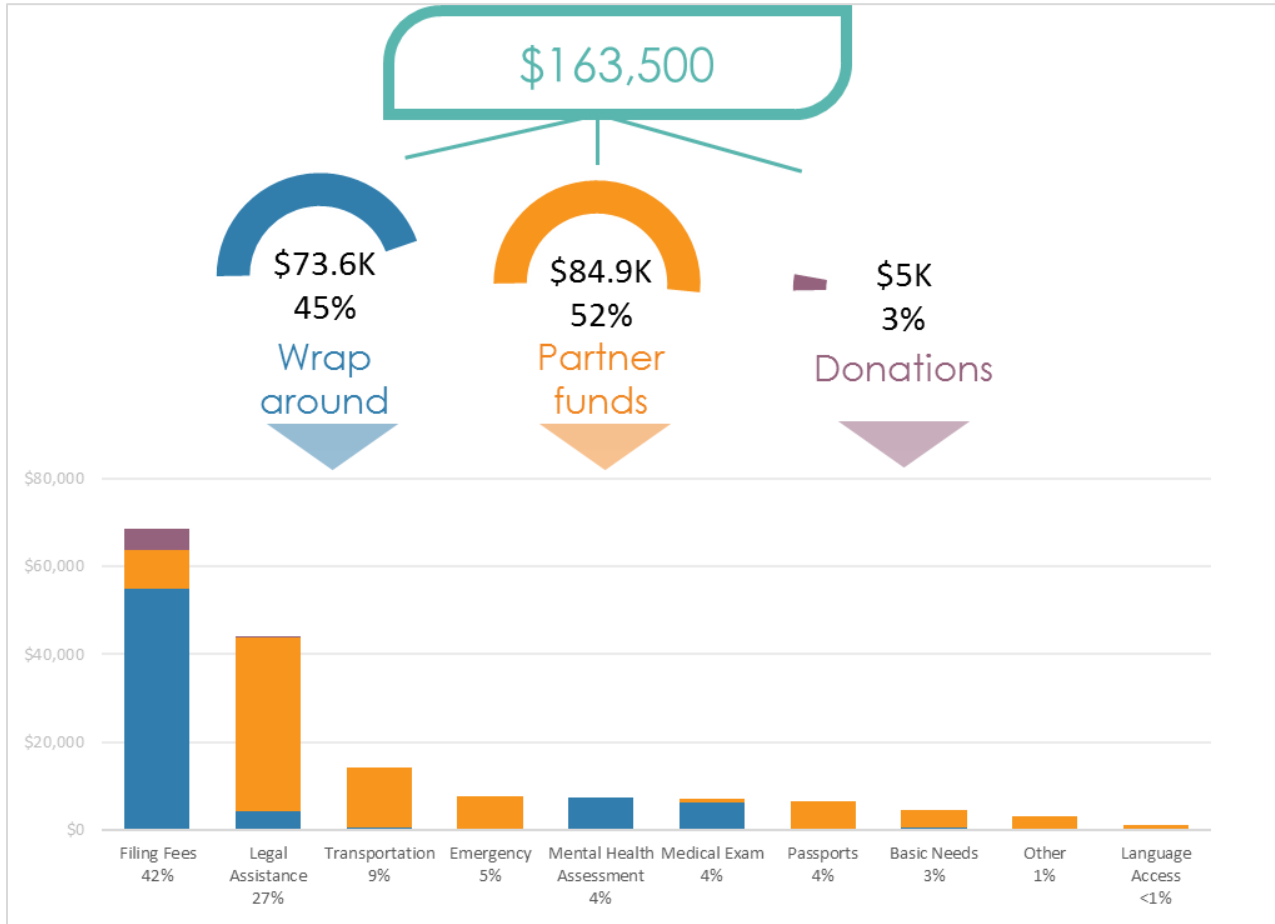
IA assisted a refugee family of six from the Democratic Republic of Congo to complete the required immigration medical exam for their adjustment of status case. The family worked with an immigration attorney from the Catholic Multicultural Center (CMC) and with a family support specialist from RISE Wisconsin. IA collaborated with both agencies and the Dane County Language Access Program to assure the family completed the exam in time to meet the deadline for the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) request for further evidence (RFE). This put the family on a path towards becoming a lawful permanent resident.



# Financial Assistance

Immigration Affairs is one of the few organizations in Dane County that provides financial assistance for immigration-related needs. The majority of the funds go towards immigration legal consultations and filing fees. IA also provides financial assistance for mental health assessments, US passports, and private transportation to immigration appointments.

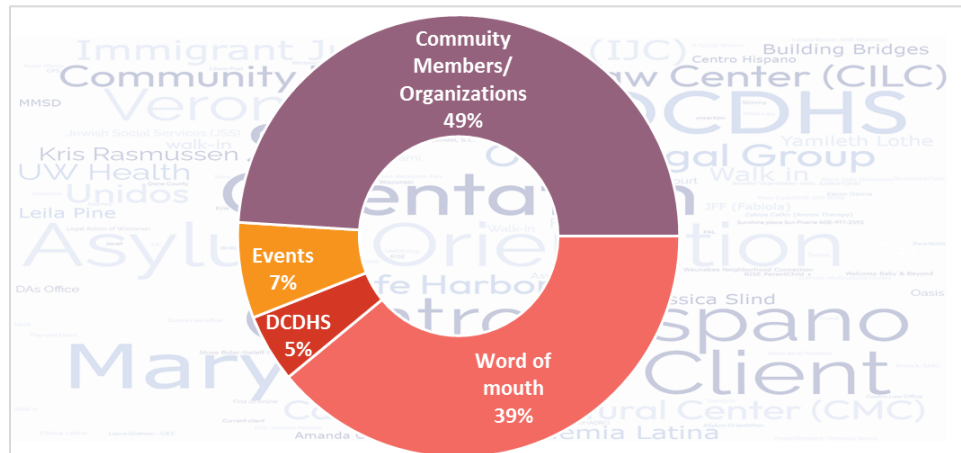
In 2023 our financial assistance to clients totaled nearly \$165,000 with funding coming from Dane County, Centro Hispano, UW-Health, and other donations. New in 2023, UW-Health generously donated \$50,000 to use in an unrestricted manner, which allowed IA the freedom to address its client’s most pressing needs. Shiva Bidar-Sielaff, Vice President and Chief Diversity Office at UW-Health had this to say, *“The Dane County Immigration Office provides an invaluable and unique service to some of the most vulnerable residents of our county. We are honored to count Fabiola Hamdan and her office as one of our closest partners, allowing us to better serve our immigrant patients and communities.”* Financial support from IA’s partners is pivotal in providing almost every service type.



# Collaboration & Partnerships

The purpose of Immigration Affairs is to help the immigrant community connect with legal services, collaborate with community partners, and develop a long-term strategy for immigrant support. Aside from serving clients, IA staff spends time cultivating partnerships.

We partner with organizations such as the Catholic Multicultural Center (CMC), Centro Hispano of Dane County, Community Immigration Law Center (CILC), Jewish Social Services (JSS), Literacy Network, Madison College, UW-Law School Immigrant Justice Clinic, Journey Mental Health, and many others. These partnerships are not only vital in supporting IA clients, but from the chart below, you can also see these relationships are reciprocal as our partners are a very important source of referrals for IA.



Jimmy Morrissey, Immigration Attorney for Catholic Multicultural Center, shares the importance of working with IA for many families.

*“The Dane County Immigration Affairs Office is instrumental in connecting individuals with our office to receive affordable legal services. They have helped our clients pay for burdensome USCIS filing fees and provide excellent case management services that include assistance with scheduling appointments and coordinating transportation, to name some examples. The Catholic Multicultural Center is very fortunate to have such an active partner at the county level.”*

Immigration Affairs serves as a coordinator and connector in the collaboration with many agencies and service providers. It regularly checks in with each agency in order to stay informed about the critical issues they face, available resources, and any workflow challenges they are

encountering. It also promotes information sharing among the agencies. These activities allow IA to access the services offered by these agencies for the benefit of our clients. Finally, IA identifies the needs and the trends of the immigrant community in Dane County. This enables IA and our partners to proactively plan for the needs of the community, making us better in coordinating services as a collaborative.

IA has become a key partner in supporting the events and initiatives below:

- Monthly Asylum Orientations
- CILC Pro Se Clinic
- Dane County Sanctuary Transportation
- Annual Immigration Affairs Luncheon
- Immigration Resource Fair
- New Immigrant Town Hall

## Goals

The success shared in this report is driven by the goals Immigration Affairs achieved in 2023 and continues to work on.

### Focus on more effectively serving asylum seekers

In partnership with the Community Immigration Law Center and Centro Hispano, IA

- Increased capacity for immigration legal services targeted at clients seeking asylum.
- Developed media materials including brochures that will assist asylum seekers in the immigration process.
- Expanded capacity for mental health services and resources for asylum seekers.

### Increase capacity to serve more clients

- Hired a bilingual/bicultural Social Service Specialist.
- Hired a bilingual/bicultural Social Worker.

### Develop contacts and expertise in select immigration service areas

- Established channels of communication with USCIS and the immigration court system.
- Received training from immigration attorneys.
- Implemented new services to support asylum seeker immigration cases.

In 2024, IA will continue to learn from our work and partners. We will use this knowledge to identify critical trends and proactively respond to coordinate services and mobilize resources as necessary.

# Contact Us

## Immigration Affairs Office

(608) 242-6260

818 W. Badger Rd. | Madison, WI 53713

<https://www.danecountyhumanservices.org/Children-Youth-and-Family/Immigration-Affairs>

### **Fabiola Hamdan, MSSW**

Pronouns: She/Her(s)/Ella

Immigration Affairs Supervisor

(608) 335-5739

[hamdan@danecounty.gov](mailto:hamdan@danecounty.gov)

### **Yesenia Villalpando-Torres, CSW**

Pronouns: She/Her(s)/Ella

Immigration Affairs Social Worker

(608) 287-4004

[villalpando@danecounty.gov](mailto:villalpando@danecounty.gov)

### **Charlyn Cruz Nuñez, APSW**

Pronouns: She/Her(s)/Ella

Immigration Affairs Social Worker

(608) 896-0199

[ccruz@danecounty.gov](mailto:ccruz@danecounty.gov)

### **Jorge Salgado**

Pronouns: He/Him/Él

Social Service Specialist

(608) 358-0707

[salgado.jorge@danecounty.gov](mailto:salgado.jorge@danecounty.gov)