The Immigration Advocacy Project at Advocates for Basic Legal Equality, Inc. (ABLE) provides quality legal services and legal information to immigrants and refugees in Northwest Ohio. We also provide critical information to community partners who serve these same communities. ABLE’s advocacy focuses on keeping families together, protecting victims of crime, and building a stronger community.

Our local work is made possible by the commitment of our funders, including the Board of Lucas County Commissioners; Borealis Philanthropy; Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Refugee Resettlement; Justice for Migrant Women; NEO Philanthropy Four Freedoms Fund; NEO Philanthropy Anti-Trafficking Fund; Ohio Access to Justice Foundation; Ohio State Bar Foundation; The Supreme Court of Ohio Civil Justice Program Fund; United Way of Greater Toledo; Vera Institute of Justice; and many supportive individuals.
It seems as if we are living in two different worlds, yet strangely simultaneously. At the national level, which of course affects our lives locally, we are living in times of tremendous suffering for immigrants, refugees, and many vulnerable populations. Hateful rhetoric and cruel policies have harmed so many of our neighbors, friends, colleagues, and classmates. Children all over the country, including in Ohio, have been ripped from the arms of their parents and separated from their families for months.

At the same time, locally, we are making great strides and achieving national recognition in building a more inclusive space for immigrants and refugees. In 2019, Lucas County become the first county in Ohio to earn Certified Welcoming status from Welcoming America. This special recognition is a testament to Lucas County’s commitment to treat all people equally regardless of where they came from or under what circumstances they arrived. ABLE is proud to have partnered with Welcome Toledo-Lucas County (Welcome TLC) from the very beginning. Initially a founding member, ABLE continues to be actively involved in the initiative, including co-chairing the Steering Committee and leading the Legal Services Committee during Welcome TLC’s entire existence.

Despite such accomplishments, our local struggles continue, and our commitment to our client communities grows deeper. There remains a significant unmet need for legal representation and immigration advocacy for low-income immigrants. There are an estimated 35,000 foreign-born individuals living in Northwest Ohio, and there are now more than 14,000 removal cases pending before the Cleveland Immigration Court, which has jurisdiction over all of Ohio. In January 2017, there were only 6,000 such cases. A recent study found that only 37% of all immigrants and 14% of detained immigrants have counsel. There is a critical need to improve access to trustworthy and affordable legal services for thousands of Ohio’s immigrants.

Through community presentations and legal clinics, we educated thousands of Northwest Ohioans on immigration laws, addressed and clarified speculation about changes to policy and law, and responded quickly and effectively to many immigration emergencies. Each presentation addressed audience questions and was followed by one-on-one individual consultations. Participants also received a copy of ABLE’s “Preparing Your Family for Immigration Enforcement: Know Your Rights.” This handbook includes details on individuals’ Constitutional rights, a Limited Power of Attorney for childcare needs, and a family emergency planning guide - all aimed at empowering families to make critical decisions for themselves in advance, rather than waiting for an emergency and then making those decisions under extremely stressful circumstances. With grants from The Supreme Court of Ohio Civil Justice Program Fund and the Ohio State Bar Foundation, the handbook is now available in six languages: English, Spanish, Arabic, Swahili, Somali, and Mandarin. It will soon be available in Kinyarwanda and French.

Immigrant clients and their families are part of the fabric of our community. Legal representation increases the chance for due process and fairness for clients facing a system that is often unbalanced and unjust. Although representation cannot entirely repair the significant harms inflicted by these systems, it plays a key role in reducing these harms and delivering due process.
How ABLE’s Immigration Advocacy Project makes a difference:

In 2019, ABLE reached more than 2,500 people directly through 34 community outreach presentations and many news articles through various media outlets. Hundreds were provided with brief counsel and advice following outreach and presentations, and through referrals from community partners. Thousands more were reached with written and online materials.

Results of Screening and Investigation:

Because of ABLE’s immigration questionnaire and in-depth screening, the majority of individuals screened were eligible for some immigration benefits and retained ABLE to represent them in that application for relief.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Case Type in Northwest Ohio*</th>
<th>Specific Case Type in Lucas County</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Naturalization &amp; Citizenship</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Reunification (includes Refugee Adjustment of Status)</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DACA Renewal</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>U Visa / VAWA</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deportation</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asylum</td>
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*Includes Lucas County numbers

Cases accepted for full representation: 74% (239)

Cases accepted for counsel & advice only: 26% (85)
Pablo is a former agricultural worker, who along with his wife, has lived in the United States for more than twenty years, six of which have been in Toledo. They are raising five children together, including one who has special needs. Pablo is the primary wage-earner for the family and is employed as a roofer. While working in Florida, he was arrested for an alleged crime but was found innocent of the charge. Still, the mere arrest led to him being detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and placed in removal proceedings in Florida. ABLE connected Pablo with a nonprofit organization in Miami that represented him at his bond hearing. ABLE coordinated preparation of supporting documents from family members in Toledo to send to Pablo’s attorney in Florida in order to increase Pablo’s chances of obtaining an immigration bond. The Immigration Judge issued a $5,000 immigration bond. After four months of detention in Florida, Pablo was finally reunited with his family in Toledo in May 2019. The family continues to suffer from the financial hardship that was caused by Pablo’s lengthy detention.

After obtaining a change of venue, ABLE is continuing to represent Pablo in his removal proceedings before the Cleveland Immigration Court. In September 2019, ABLE filed an application for Cancellation of Removal, and quickly thereafter, an application for employment authorization. Pablo’s trial is currently scheduled for August 2022.

Amara is a 34-year-old widow originally from Syria. She, her husband, and their two children arrived in Toledo in January 2017 as refugees. Before arriving in Toledo, the family lived in a refugee camp in Jordan for five years. Unfortunately, about a year after their arrival in the United States, Amara’s husband was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer and passed away. ABLE represented Amara and her children in their applications for Lawful Permanent Residency status, all of which were granted. ABLE also referred Amara to necessary supportive services during this difficult time in her life.

Since then, Amara has learned how to drive, continues to learn English, and is saving money to buy a house in Toledo.

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Samantha is a 21-year-old woman who first came to the United States at age 3. She attended elementary, middle, and high school in Toledo. While a student at Bowsher High School and making plans to start college, she learned of her undocumented immigration status. In 2015, she heard about the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA) and came to ABLE for an immigration consultation. ABLE determined that she was eligible for the DACA program and filed an application on her behalf. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) approved Samantha’s application, and she immediately began working part-time to save money for college. Samantha then enrolled in a local college and earned her Medical Assistant degree. Samantha is now working at a local hospital.

In 2019, ABLE filed an application to renew Samantha’s DACA status. ABLE continues to keep her informed of any developments regarding DACA.