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September 24, 2025

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor, State of California
1021 O Street, Suite 9000
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: AB 1261 (Bonta) – Immigrant Youth: Access to Legal Counsel

Dear Governor Newsom,

On behalf of the undersigned **84 legal services, community, and advocacy organizations**, we write in strong support and respectfully request your signature on AB 1261 authored by Assemblymember Mia Bonta. AB 1261 seeks to protect children and youth from the Trump administration's mass deportations by expanding access to legal counsel, subject to the availability of funding, to every immigrant youth in California facing deportation in immigration court without a lawyer.

California is the state with the largest immigrant population in the nation and home to one of the largest populations of unaccompanied minors seeking protection in the United States. Every year, thousands of children - including infants - appear in immigration court, alone, facing deportation against a highly trained government prosecutor while the immigration judge is under the direction of the United States Attorney General. 90% of unaccompanied children facing deportation in court without lawyers are ordered deported.¹ Legal representation is not a luxury – it's a lifeline to safeguard the rights of children across California.

No person detained in government custody and/or facing deportation should be forced to navigate complex court proceedings alone – especially children.

Unaccompanied children are fleeing violence, persecution, and extreme poverty from their home countries without their parents in order to seek safety and refuge, and many qualify for immigration relief, such as asylum or Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), but are unable to access the legal protections they are entitled to under federal law without a lawyer. State-funded legal services serve as the first line of defense to protect the safety and rights of children across California facing deportation by the federal government.

¹ Vera Institute of Justice, "Representation Matters: No Child Should Appear in Immigration Court Alone," December 2021, <https://www.vera.org/publications/representation-matters>

In March 2025, the Trump administration announced the termination of federal funding to more than 80 legal services providers of a legal aid program that provided free legal representation to 26,000 children facing deportation in court or held in government custody.² Recently, the federal government attempted to deport hundreds of unaccompanied minors ages 10 to 17 years old during the middle of the night, however, a federal judge blocked the deportation flights.³ While [more than 5,000 Californians](#) have been arrested and detained by federal agents in mass immigration raids and arrests on public streets, work sites and in our neighborhoods, unaccompanied children are at heightened risk of Trump's mass deportations. **California must meet the moment and help ensure children facing deportation have access to a lawyer in court.**

California has been a leader nationwide in enacting numerous measures to defend California's immigrant communities, and we see AB 1261 as a critical opportunity to defend and protect the rights of children when the federal government is targeting them for mass deportations. In FY 2014-15, California made history being the first-in-the-nation to invest state funding for qualified nonprofit organizations providing legal representation to unaccompanied children and youth facing deportation across California. **For the past 10 years, legal services organizations across California have provided free legal representation to over 5,600 children facing deportation through the Youth Legal Services Program** and hundreds more children being served under California's Removal Defense Program and the Children's Holistic Immigration Representation Project (CHIRP).

AB 1261 helps ensure that no child is forced to face deportation against the federal government alone without a lawyer. This bill would expand access to lawyers for children facing deportation in immigration court, increasing access to legal protections they are legally entitled to. By expanding access to legal counsel for immigrant children and youth facing deportation, California can defend and protect the safety and rights of all children.

For these reasons, we are proud to support and request your signature for AB 1261 (Bonta). If you have any questions, or would like more information regarding our support, please contact the California Immigrant Policy Center at bhuizar@caimmigrant.org.

² Santana, Rebecca, Associated Press (AP), "Trump administration cuts legal help for migrant children traveling alone," March 21, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-legal-aid-unaccompanied-children-immigration-court-127a69ce69573d2d16c72a74dacef3ab>

³ Cheney, Kyle and Gerstein, Josh, POLITICO, "Judge blocks flights sending hundreds of children back to Guatemala," Aug. 31, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/08/31/judge-blocks-deportation-guatemalan-children-00538395>

Sincerely,



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Acacia Center for Justice



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AFSCME 3299



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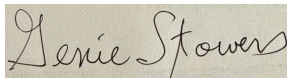
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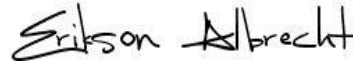
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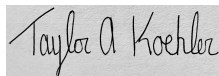
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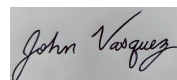
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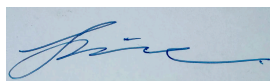
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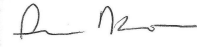
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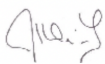
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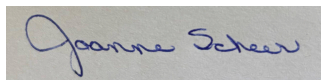
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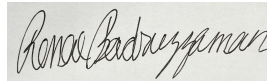
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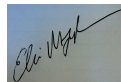
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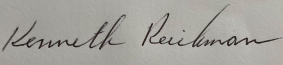
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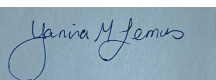
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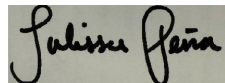
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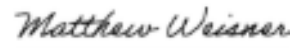


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CC: *The Honorable Mia Bonta*
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