

# UnidosUS and CLINIC: Scaling Through Partnership

## Overview

In 2014, the U.S. House of Representatives was presented with a Senate-passed comprehensive immigration reform bill that included a process for millions of undocumented immigrants who met eligibility requirements to apply for legal status in the United States. After the House failed to act, President Obama announced executive actions that would have provided some undocumented immigrants the ability to apply for protection from deportation and work authorization.\* Networks of community-based immigration legal service providers were preparing to respond. However, the courts ultimately blocked these actions, and nearly a decade later, there remains a continued substantial need for immigration legal services and a critical shortage of legal services available to serve immigrants.† For either legislative or executive proposals to be effective, the United States needs massive growth in the immigration legal services field.‡

To address this need, a network-to-network partnership was formed between UnidosUS (then National Council of La Raza) and the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC) in 2014 with the aim of increasing immigration legal services by maximizing the immigration legal services capacity of UnidosUS Affiliates. UnidosUS and CLINIC sought to advance a shared goal of maximizing the successful participation of eligible persons in legalization by leveraging CLINIC's proven technical expertise and capacity with UnidosUS Affiliates, who together serve several million Latinos annually—many of whom may be eligible for immigration relief—through their existing education, health, housing, workforce development, and social service programs.

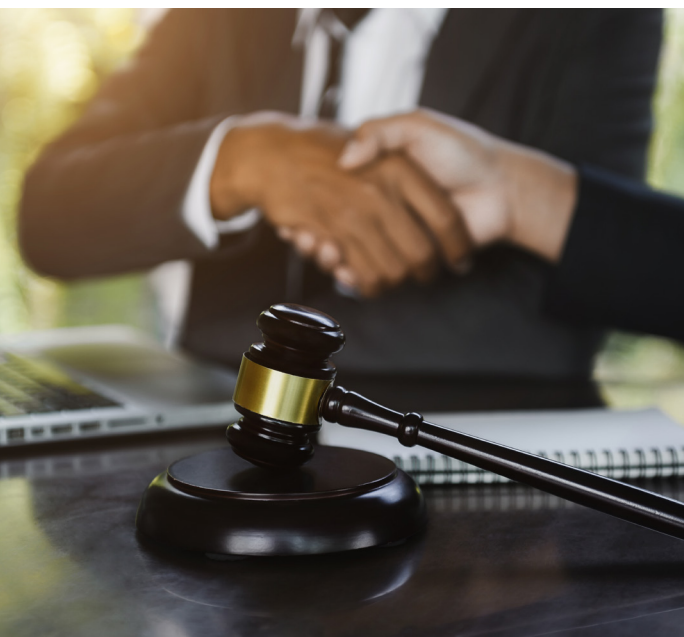
\* The White House, "Fact Sheet: Immigration Accountability Executive Action," The White House, November 20, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/20/fact-sheet-immigration-accountability-executive-action>.

† For example, for every nonprofit immigration legal services professional, there are 1,413 undocumented immigrants. See "Charitable Legal Immigration Programs and the US Undocumented Population: A Study in Access to Justice in an Era of Political Dysfunction," Kerwin, D. and Millet, E. (2022). <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/23315024221124924>.

‡ Kamasaki, C., Timmons, S., Tudi, C., Collins, A., Holmgren, J., Kerwin, D., and O'Brien, K. (2015). Immigration Reform and Administrative Relief for 2014 and Beyond: A Report on Behalf of the Committee for Immigration Reform Implementation (CIRI), Human Resources Working Group. *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 3(3), 283-305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/233150241500300303>.



Nearly 10 years later, the CLINIC-UnidosUS partnership has significantly increased the capacity for immigration legal services. Since the partnership began, the number of UnidosUS Affiliates recognized by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) has doubled, increasing access to low-cost, high-quality immigration legal services. This growth is the result of intentional investment in strengthening and expanding existing capacity and establishing new programs. Despite this growth, there remains a significant gap between the need for immigration legal services and the current ability to meet those needs. For example, there are 9 million eligible lawful permanent residents who could apply for U.S. citizenship, and there are about 1 million undocumented immigrants who may have some form of immigration benefit available to them if they could access qualified immigration legal services.\*† Additionally, some immigrants may be eligible for certain protections, such as deferred action or Temporary Protected Status. The CLINIC-UnidosUS partnership serves as a model that other networks could replicate to expand access to immigration legal services.



#### Since 1958,

the U.S. Department of Justice has operated the recognition and accreditation process with the goal of increasing “the availability of competent immigration legal representation for low-income and indigent persons.” Nonprofit organizations apply for “recognition” and non-attorneys who meet eligibility criteria apply for “accreditation” to provide legal representation. As of February 18, 2024, there are 852 recognized organizations and 2,422 Accredited Representatives.‡

\* Department of Homeland Security, “Policy: Lawful Permanent Resident Population Estimates 2019-2021,” May 2022, [https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/22\\_0405\\_plcy\\_lpr\\_population\\_estimates\\_2019\\_-\\_2021.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/22_0405_plcy_lpr_population_estimates_2019_-_2021.pdf).

† Wong, T. K., Kerwin, D., Atkinson, J. M., and McCarthy, M. M. (2014). Paths to Lawful Immigration Status: Results and Implications from the PERSON Survey. *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 2(4), 287-304. <https://doi.org/10.1177/233150241400200402>.

‡ Department of Justice, Recognition and Accreditation (R&A) Program Roster Reports, February 2024, <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/recognition-accreditation-roster-reports>.

## How the Partnership Works

Early on in preparing for the implementation of immigration reform, UnidosUS and its Affiliates identified key challenges within the network's landscape. One significant obstacle faced by local organizations with limited budgets was the cost of legal training fees. To address this obstacle, UnidosUS sought collaboration with CLINIC, the largest non-profit immigration law organization specializing in high-quality and affordable training.

Since 2014, UnidosUS has provided a subgrant to CLINIC, allowing UnidosUS Affiliates access to CLINIC's premier course: Comprehensive Overview of Immigration Law (COIL).<sup>\*</sup> The course spans several weeks and covers core immigration law concepts; COIL provides new practitioners with the fundamentals of immigration law and fulfills a core requirement to support an application for Department of Justice Recognition and Accreditation (DOJ R&A). In establishing the partnership, UnidosUS held workshops at its signature events for its Affiliate Network to learn about this opportunity and disseminated the information in its e-newsletter to the Affiliate Network. Since then, COIL has become a valuable resource for Affiliates looking to start or increase their immigration legal services capacity and has become a training that Affiliates count on to grow the number of staff who have a basic understanding of immigration policy and the role of accredited representatives.

In addition to actively disseminating information about the training to its Affiliates, UnidosUS also provides technical assistance, curated materials, and, at times, seed funding to Affiliates intending to start or expand immigration legal services. UnidosUS also convenes the cohort of immigration legal service providers and facilitates peer-to-peer exchanges among Affiliates to share insights into the DOJ R&A application process. Additionally, CLINIC further supports UnidosUS Affiliates by offering its expertise on DOJ R&A,<sup>†</sup> a technically complex process.

“Thank you for sharing this important information. This always helps us to train more of our staff that we would not be able to do otherwise.”

**UnidosUS Affiliate in Florida, upon receipt of the COIL complimentary registration code**

UnidosUS Affiliates have registered their staff in the course, who subsequently pursue accreditation and provide immigration legal services. This pathway has been successful in starting new programs and growing the capacity of existing programs to meet the increasing demand for affordable, high-quality services in Affiliates' communities.

“We have at least one staff member (maybe more) who would love to sign up for the COIL training. We really appreciate this benefit to our UnidosUS membership.”

**UnidosUS Affiliate, Washington, DC**

<sup>\*</sup> The online course costs \$495 for CLINIC Affiliates and \$545 for nonprofit organizations that are not part of the CLINIC network.

<sup>†</sup> For more on the ways that the recognition and accreditation program is useful in building immigration legal services capacity, see Karen Sullivan, “The Severely Under-Resourced R&A Program is an Essential Tool to Meet Growing Needs for Affordable Immigration Legal Services” (2021), accessed January 10, 2024, <https://cliniclegal.org/resources/federal-administrative-advocacy/policy-brief-severely-under-resourced-ra-program>.

## Takeaways from the Partnership

The alliance between UnidosUS and CLINIC has demonstrated the strength of network collaboration in building immigration legal services. The overall growth in legal services has been significant: New applications for accreditation drastically increased between 2010-2016, with a jump from just 10 applications for partial certification in 2010 to 830 in 2016.\* A portion of this growth has come from the UnidosUS network. Since 2015, the number of UnidosUS affiliates registering for COIL has grown significantly. Initially, only five individuals registered for the course.

In contrast, from 2021 through 2023, the average number of annual registrants has increased to 100, representing a staggering growth of at least 1,900%. This growth underscores the need for affordable, high-quality immigration legal training and services. This partnership serves as a model for other networks to expand their legal services capacity through intentional investment in strengthening and developing existing programs and establishing new ones. The collaboration between UnidosUS and CLINIC showcases the potential for continued success in advancing immigration legal services through network collaboration.

A somewhat surprising lesson has been that some Affiliates encourage staff to take the training even if they will not be applying for accreditation immediately. One Affiliate enrolled a staff member who led their workforce development program and wanted a better understanding of different immigration statuses and their implications for college and work eligibility. Other Affiliates have enrolled frontline staff so they can better understand who is permitted to provide immigration-related advice and to facilitate more robust referrals. An executive director, whose organization was preparing to launch an immigration legal services program, gained a significantly improved comprehension of the essential requirements for effectively serving prospective clients. The staff enrolled have varied backgrounds, with some Affiliates registering team members who have law degrees and need an introduction to immigration law, while others do not have advanced degrees but may go on to pursue law school or become paralegals in the future.† Some organizations use the training as part of a “career pathway” that enables entry-level staff to gain skills required for upward mobility. Investing in staff professional development not only enhances staff retention but also serves as a successful recruitment strategy by hiring individuals who can advance into the role of accredited representative.

The significance of the model for the immigration legal services field is that the partnership represents an effective and efficient way of providing a needed resource. Instead of attempting to replicate training that CLINIC has perfected and that requires extensive experience and expertise, the partnership has enabled UnidosUS to expand the immigration legal services capacity within its network, contributing in other ways such as providing modest grants and connecting Affiliates to one another for peer exchanges. Because UnidosUS encourages its Affiliates to become part of the CLINIC network, they gain access to ongoing training and support. This partnership also grows CLINIC’s network, providing additional membership dues and making it a more attractive grantee to potential funders.

\* Key Takeaways from FOIA Request on Office of Legal Access Programs (OLAP) and the Recognition and Accreditation Program” (2021), accessed January 12, 2024, <https://cliniclegal.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Key%20Takeaways%20from%20Freedom%20of%20Information%20Act%20Request%20on%20Office%20of%20Legal%20Access%20Programs%20%28OLAP%29%20and%20the%20Recognition%20and%20Accreditation%20Program.pdf>.

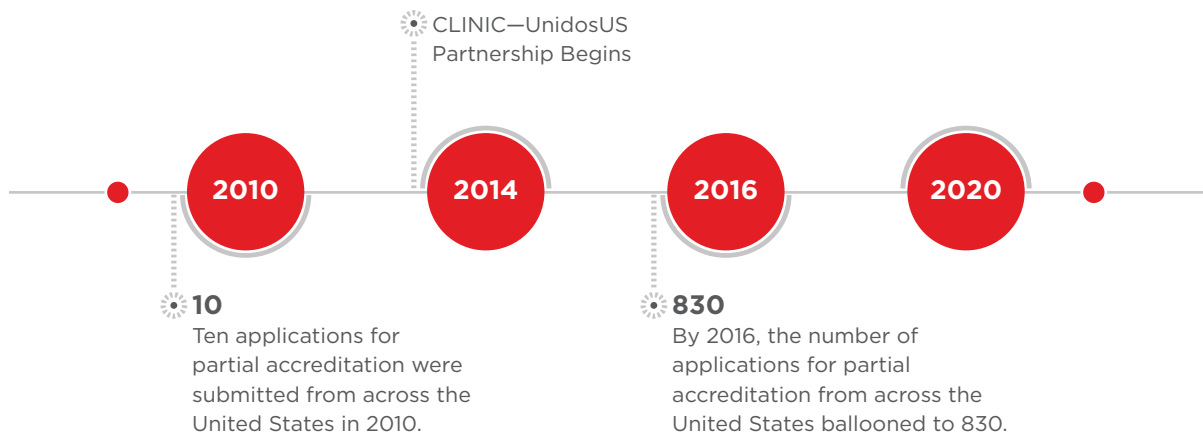
† Titles of the staff registered for the course include: receptionist, paralegal, legal assistant, program coordinator, attorney, pro bono attorney, program director, director of community support services, executive director, case manager, and community health worker.

“I just saw an announcement that CLINIC is offering their Comprehensive Overview of Immigration Law webinar series again this fall and was wondering if we still might qualify (as a UnidosUS affiliate) for the free tuition for the course. Over the last couple of years, several of our staff have taken that course as the first step toward partial accreditation by the Department of Justice, and they all found it very helpful. We have 2-3 staff members who would like to begin preparing for accreditation.”

UnidosUS Affiliate, Texas

### CLINIC—UnidosUS Scaling Through Partnership

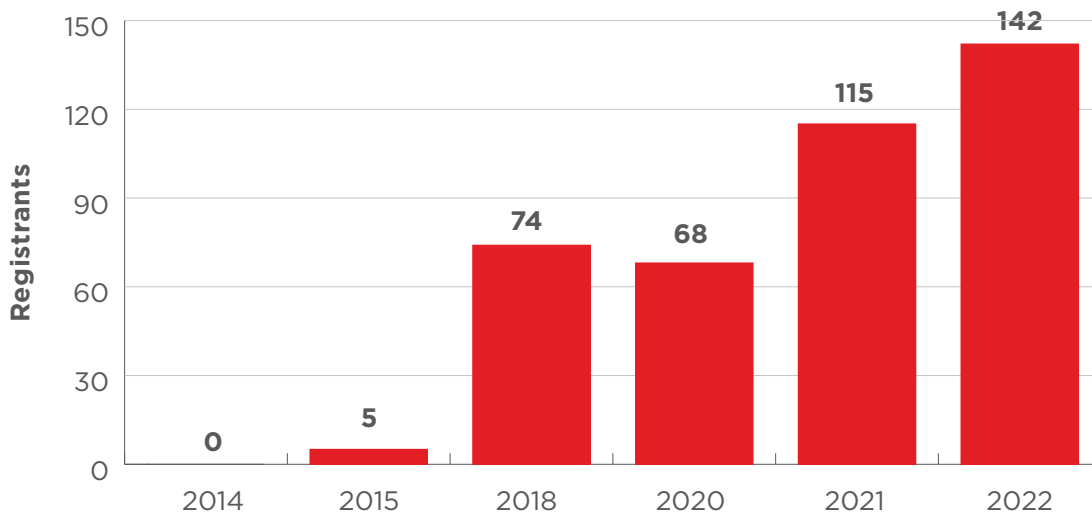
Since 2014, UnidosUS has provided a subgrant to CLINIC, allowing UnidosUS Affiliates access to CLINIC’s premier course: Comprehensive Overview of Immigration Law (COIL)



The figure above demonstrates a timeline that includes the growth in applications filed for partial accreditation submitted to the Department of Justice from 10 applications in 2010 to 830 by 2016. During this time, the CLINIC and UnidosUS partnership began, but other important milestones also contributed to this impressive growth in the field. For example, in 2012, the Obama administration announced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy that required growth in immigration legal services to implement the policy. Despite the Trump administration’s efforts to reduce the number of immigrants entering the U.S. and to erect barriers for immigrants in the U.S. to adjust their status or have protections from deportation, immigration legal service providers remained undeterred in responding to the continually evolving and complex changes in immigration policies. For example, after President Trump signed Executive Order 13780 in 2017, there were challenges for immigrants coming from Muslim-majority countries. Immigration legal service providers had to address issues such as providing legal counseling to immigrants from Muslim-majority countries on how to safely and legally re-enter the U.S.; reunifying families from Muslim-majority countries; and advising how to navigate the public charge of inadmissibility rule. Overall, these (among many other) anti-immigrant policies did not deter the growth of legal service providers; rather, they fueled the increased demand for competent, reliable, and trustworthy legal service providers in community-based organizations.



UnidosUS Affiliates and COIL



Since 2015, UnidosUS Affiliates’ COIL registrations have grown significantly, from just five individuals initially to an average of 100 per year in the last three years—a staggering growth of at least 1,900%.

The figure above demonstrates the growth in registrations for the CLINIC Comprehensive Overview of Immigration Law training among UnidosUS Affiliates. It is important to note that the cumulative increase in registrations took place despite the enactment of an immigration reform bill and that it shows growth during the Trump administration and the global pandemic. This strong interest in training that can be the basis to start or grow an immigration legal services program corresponds with exponential needs seen by Affiliates in their communities, such as increased capacity to conduct DACA renewals, citizenship application assistance, and assist asylum seekers. Some of the growth has occurred in cities and states where local governments have invested in immigration legal services programs.

## About UnidosUS

UnidosUS is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that serves as the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Since 1968, we have challenged the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos through our unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an [Affiliate Network](#) of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico. We believe in an America where economic, political, and social progress is a reality for all Latinos, and we collaborate across communities to achieve it.

For more information on UnidosUS, visit [www.unidosus.org](http://www.unidosus.org) or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [X](#).

## About Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC)

For more than 35 years, the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., has provided training and support to a dedicated network of more than 450 Catholic and community-based immigration law providers in 49 states. By supporting approximately 3,000 network employees with diverse and in-depth training, real-time updates and best practices, CLINIC serves over 500,000 immigrants a year, making it the largest nonprofit immigration law organization in the country.

For more information on CLINIC, visit [www.cliniclegal.org](http://www.cliniclegal.org).

