

Immigration enforcement abuses loomed large with **Project 2025**.

We have all seen the headlines on **ICE abuses—in Minneapolis, in Chicago, in Texas, and here in Vermont**. Mohsen Mahdawi. Ruymesa Ozturk. Nacho and Heidi. Esther. Nafiou. Alexi. Vilma. Wali. Mohammed. Hussein. Steven Tendo. The Richford 8. And dozens more Vermonters who are too afraid to share their stories.

When ICE strikes, whole **families, neighborhoods, faith communities, and workplaces** are forced to grapple with the enormity of a neighbor's disappearance overnight. Our **schools, farms, hospitals, and small businesses** feel the ripple effect, and each incident leaves our communities feeling more afraid and less resilient.

**The good news** is that when Vermonters have access to **legal counsel and a fair hearing**, they are **more than twice as likely** to avoid deportation and return home to their families, jobs, and communities.

When Vermont lawyers seek **judicial review of ICE's violence**, they activate the Constitutional checks and balances that protect the democratic **rule of law for all**.

To their credit, Vermont leaders activated a **fundraising campaign in May 2025** to hire more defense lawyers—the VT Immigrant Legal Defense Fund (VILDF).

At the time, Vermont had **only two licensed** detention defense attorneys to respond to the **existing 1000** Vermonters facing deportation—those with the highest risk of ICE detention—let alone the **10-fold increase** in new detentions recorded statewide.

In 2025, roughly **900 immigrants were detained** in Vermont facilities, with dozens more arrested locally and transferred out of state. Migrant Justice received **110 distinct calls for detention help** last year—up from just **10 the year before**.

Emergency state funding deployed new detention defense teams by August. As a result, by December, local attorneys had reached about **120 detained people in Vermont**—securing **over 40 full representations** and providing limited bond, habeas, and asylum assistance to **80 additional people**.

Attorneys also mobilized a network of **100 volunteer attorneys, interpreters, and students** to help with detention prevention legal work—resulting in additional no-cost asylum grants, bond victories, and federal court orders checking ICE overreach. For example, Vermont Legal Aid helped **85 immigrant families and 117 children to secure emergency guardianship** plans to prevent children from entering state custody if a noncitizen parent is detained.

This year, **new Vermont attorneys made concrete differences**:

- a **former child soldier** with disabilities secured procedural safeguards in his asylum hearing;
- a **longtime Vermont father of U.S. citizen children** was not misled by ICE into signing away his rights and self-deporting;
- a **medically vulnerable woman** regained access to prescribed medications so she could work with counsel and, ultimately, walk free;

- a **detained transgender asylum seeker** was protected from a dangerous transfer to Texas—while another trans Vermonter, stable in the community, won asylum for their entire family of four.

This work is not just about individual **humanitarian** cases. It keeps children in **school**, parents at **work**, and communities out of crisis.

It also **protects Vermont's financial future**. ICE worked to deport hundreds of Vermont immigrants last year, people who contribute over **\$171 million annually in state and local taxes** – worsening Vermont's overall population decline (by 1,800 residents) for the second year in a row.

It also **protects Vermont's state sovereignty** and **Vermonters' fundamental freedoms**. When Vermont lawyers seek judicial review, they ask courts to enforce the constitutional checks and balances that safeguard the rule of law.

If the Legislature **strengthens due process** protections through bills like S.208, S.209, and S.227, we must stabilize funding for the **attorneys who make those protections enforceable**. As we learned this year, without lawyers to seek remedies, ICE's rights violations go unchallenged.

**Here's the solution:** An investment of **\$400,000 to sustain the 2.0 FTE immigration attorney positions being piloted at Vermont Legal Aid** would be a critical boost to Vermont's small but mighty immigration defense infrastructure.

Each 1.0 FTE attorney will directly serve an additional **60–80 low-income Vermonters facing family separation and banishment** per year, and multiply impact through pro bono supervision and Know Your Rights education. Increasing representation even modestly would significantly raise the proportion of detained Vermonters with counsel—and we know that representation more than doubles a detained person's chance of avoiding deportation.

**In contrast, without counsel, Vermont risks:**

- another young **Vermont mother suffering** summary deportation in violation of federal and international law.
- another **refugee detained for over a year** after already winning asylum.
- another English-learning asylum seeker being placed in **solitary confinement** over untranslated facility rules.
- more detainees being deported after **ICE's failure to produce them for their video court hearings**.

This funding is **not duplicative** of the Vermont Immigration Legal Defense Fund, whose initial fundraising goal has not yet been met. Instead, a **\$400,000 investment ensures** that Vermont's commitment to due process has teeth. Access to counsel doesn't just change individual outcomes—it **strengthens families, stabilizes communities, and reinforces Vermont's commitment** to due process.

An estimated additional **100 Vermont residents have been detained so far in 2026**—at home, at work, in their cars—and advocates expect the numbers to keep climbing. If the Legislature creates stronger **protections for Vermonters interacting with ICE**—private rights of action, sensitive locations safeguards, detention standards—we **will need lawyers to enforce them**. Otherwise, those protections exist only on paper.

**Leonora Dodge (she/her/ella)**

VT State Representative

