



Legislation Text

File #: 21-70, **Version:** 2

STRATEGIC PRIORITY: Human and Social Needs
AGENDA DATE: February 10, 2021
COUNCIL DISTRICT(S): All
DEPARTMENT: Office of Equity and Inclusion
EXECUTIVE: M. Elizabeth Cedillo-Pereira

SUBJECT

Authorize the execution of a Safe Network Agreement with the Vera Institute of Justice Inc. to **(1)** administer the civil immigration legal services initiative; and **(2)** provide in-kind infrastructure support including training and technical assistance, data collection, reporting, program monitoring, and communications assistance, in an amount not to exceed \$100,000.00, for the period September 16, 2020 through September 15, 2022 - Not to exceed \$100,000.00 - Financing: General Fund

BACKGROUND

The Office of Welcoming Communities and Immigrant Affairs (WCIA) was established in March 2017 to promote the civic, economic and cultural contributions of immigrants and refugees to the City of Dallas. Among WCIA's first priorities was to oversee an economic and demographic study of immigrants in Dallas. The "Welcoming Dallas Strategic Plan" was approved by Resolution No. 18-1520 on October 24, 2018 pursuant to the study and a survey. The survey assessed quality of life issues of immigrants and refugees in Dallas via a survey, finding a consistent and top concern to be the increased federal immigration enforcement system. After reaching its peak in FY 2018, the Dallas enforcement area of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has become the national leader in ICE apprehensions. Many of these apprehensions lead to individuals being placed in removal proceedings in Dallas.

Studies show that immigrants who are represented in removal proceedings are up to ten times more likely to establish a right to remain in the United States (US) versus those who are unrepresented.

Dallas derives significant benefits from the economic, social and cultural contributions of immigrant families. As an inclusive city, Dallas cares deeply when these families' lives are impacted and disrupted by immigration detention. By providing civil immigration legal assistance, detained immigrants will be able to have their cases adjudicated by immigration courts and return to their families and the workplace more expeditiously, minimizing the financial burdens they would otherwise experience.

On September 23, 2020, the Dallas City Council approved the FY 2020-2021 budget which included funds to provide civil immigration legal services for Dallas residents. Funding was established to support affordable and available access to legal services to City of Dallas residents in removal proceedings, including pathways to citizenship. The services are currently included as one of the 44 initiatives on the FY 2020-2021 Budget Accountability Report.

Since March of 2020, WCIA Division has partnered with the Vera Institute for Justice, Inc. (Vera) for the provision of, among other services, civil immigration legal services. Through this program, Dallas residents who are pro se and lack sufficient monetary resources are provided access to legal representation before the Dallas Immigration Courts. Vera has provided program performance, confidential data collection and evaluation throughout the process. As the administrator of the Safety and Fairness for Everyone (SAFE) network, Vera has also connected the City of Dallas with best practices and information from other sites participating across the US. Thanks to this partnership, the City of Dallas has been meeting its target service goals, despite the setbacks of the COVID-19 pandemic.

WCIA Division proposes contracting with Vera to continue its participation in the SAFE Network and administer the City's civil immigration legal services program. Vera is a standard bearer in the civil rights and access to justice programming. Vera has long served as a contract provider to the U.S. Department of Justice, Executive Office for Immigration Review to enable its legal access programming and provides technical assistance to municipalities throughout the U.S. to participate in the Network. Vera is unique in that it has established and manages the SAFE Network, which includes consultation services that supports access to justice programs initiated by municipal governments. Because of the extremely technical nature of this type of legal work, it is necessary to have Vera guide the City of Dallas through this program, avoiding unnecessary risk or liability.

Vera is the only organization to offer in-kind technical assistance and training for immigration legal services to municipal governments. Through this program, Dallas residents who are detained by Immigration & Customs Enforcement will have access to legal representation before the Dallas Immigration Courts.

The provision of these services is for the public purpose of increasing the public health, safety, and welfare of all persons in the municipality. This program is aligned with strategic priorities identified by City Council, including (1) Human and Social Needs as a Strategic Priority and (2) the City's "Dallas Resilience" report. No other organization can provide such services.

PRIOR ACTION/REVIEW (COUNCIL, BOARDS, COMMISSIONS)

On June 12, 2019, City Council authorized a Safe Network Agreement with Vera committing (1) the City to remit \$100,000.00 in funding to Vera for representation of Dallas residents before the Executive Office of Immigration Review; (2) Vera to remit a matching catalyst grant of \$100,000.00 to the selected non-profit legal service provider; and (3) Vera to provide in-kind support including the selection of a non-profit legal services provider in Dallas recognized to practice before the Immigration Court, training and technical assistance, data collection, reporting, program monitoring, and communications assistance by Resolution No. 19-0901.

On September 23, 2020, City Council authorized FY 2020-21 funding for Welcoming Communities and Immigrant Affairs Division's operating budget via the annual Operating and Capital Budgets' Appropriation Ordinance by Ordinance No. 31655.

Information about this item was provided to the Workforce, Education and Equity Committee meeting on February 8, 2021.

FISCAL INFORMATION

Fund	FY 2020-21	FY 2021-22	Future Years
General Fund	\$100,000.00	\$0.00	\$0.00

OWNER

Vera Institute of Justice, Inc.

Adair Iacono, General Counsel and Secretary
Annie Chen, Program Director, Center on Immigration and Justice