RAICES ENVISONS A COMPASSIONATE SOCIETY WHERE ALL PEOPLE HAVE THE RIGHT TO MIGRATE AND HUMAN RIGHTS ARE GUARANTEED.
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When Donald Trump’s Justice Department enacted a “zero tolerance” policy last summer for so-called illegal entry into the U.S., children fleeing violence in Central America were ripped from their parents and locked in cages. The most vulnerable among us were under attack, their very lives on the line.

As we have been for the past three decades, RAICES was there. Our pro-bono attorneys and staff mobilized immediately to help reunite families, free children and families from detention, and help migrants get medical care they desperately needed. We were stretched beyond our capacity. That didn’t stop us from working day and night, doing everything we could to alleviate the suffering, and to free those seeking a safe harbor in our country.

That spirit—fighting relentlessly to improve the lives of our clients—is the same one I recognized when I joined RAICES 11 years ago. As a young lawyer working at the country’s largest detention center in Pearsall, Texas, I was in awe of what RAICES could do—taking on dozens of cases when it ostensibly had capacity for only a few. Other immigration attorneys typically took on a handful of cases rather than a large group at once; RAICES was taking a radically new approach.

It’s the same spirit RAICES brought into the first half of 2018, before the border crisis hit, and before our subsequent expansion. Whether refugees from Somalia and other countries are facing sudden deportation and abuse, or a truck load of Central Americans fleeing violence and poverty are caught up in a political battle that will determine their fate, we are there. We are on the scene, punching above our weight, taking risks, and doing everything humanly possible to win tough fights and create a better America.

It has been my honor to lead RAICES since 2008. Like many members of staff, I am myself an immigrant. Born in Canada to an Irish family, my experience with our system has shown me that borders exist for some more than others—often according to one’s race and class. It is unacceptable to me that anyone is facing the brutal vicissitudes of the American immigration system that both major political parties have created.

From our origins as a grassroots group with a staff of three, RAICES doesn’t pick and choose: We are taking on the whole challenge, despite the long odds. We walk toward the fire, not away from it. We have done so throughout our history and in the leanest of times—fighting for our clients and taking on ever more cases when we had very little support to draw on. We always find a way.

Now, with your help, we can do so much more. Following an outpouring of support last year in the midst of the family separation crisis, we have scaled up our capacity and refined our strategy as never before. It’s always been RAICES’ way to serve our clients holistically and think big. But thanks to the help of more than half a million donors worldwide, we have been able to formally reimagine ourselves as not just a legal services nonprofit but as a human rights organization.

In less than a year, we have nearly tripled our staff; created advocacy, social services and litigation departments and grown the development department; opened three new Texas offices; and expanded operations nationally. In 2018 we provided legal and case management protection that impacted the lives of more than 115,000 refugees and immigrants, including unaccompanied children and LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. We fought in the courts, exposed abuses in the media, and became a national voice and fierce advocate for all those seeking refuge and a better life in this country.

We are not stopping there. Every day our community faces fresh attacks from an administration bent on dehumanizing migrants. Whether slamming the door shut on people seeking refuge in our country or holding people in detention centers rife with physical and emotional abuse, our government is enacting an immigration policy that is intentionally inhumane, tyrannical, and chaotic. To battle it, we will need to draw on everything we have—with creativity, compassion, and resolve.

Ours will always be an asymmetric battle. But so were defining battles in our country’s history, from civil rights to women’s suffrage, and from worker’s rights to LGBTQ+ rights. As with those struggles, there are big victories and partial reprieves: What matters—and what will ultimately make us succeed—is our commitment to each other, and to restoring the soul of our country.
2018: A Transformative Year

STANDING UP TO DEHUMANIZING ATTACKS.
THINKING BIG.
CREATING A VIBRANT, COMPASSIONATE SOCIETY.

Since our founding in 1986, RAICES has worked tirelessly on behalf of the migrant community in the United States.

We evolved from a staff of several people—providing food and medical assistance to Central American refugees fleeing civil war in an office without air conditioning—to become one of the largest legal service providers to immigrants in the country.

Last year, we continued to put our expertise, passion and creativity to work for those seeking safety and a better life in the U.S. With your help, we also laid the groundwork to operate on a vastly greater scale. RAICES is deepening the legal aid and social services we provide to migrants throughout Texas, extending our reach across the border and into other states. We are also going beyond our core legal work, building an operation that’s ready to advocate for the rights of immigrants wherever that fight may take us, and together create a society we can all be proud of.
Change in Action

We Stepped Up and Scaled Up.

We stepped up to every attack the Trump administration launched against immigrants, from tearing families apart to holding children in cages. We scaled up by doubling in size, providing even more support where it was needed most.

Over 536,000 people around the world were moved to donate $20.8 million for our efforts. ...and we made history with the largest-ever Facebook fundraiser last summer.

Our expanded legal teams:

Closed 37,863 cases, impacting the lives of 115,361 people—including clients and their dependents—at no cost to them

Launched a national “Families Together” hotline that alone helped us reunify 367 families

Provided legal services to more than 5,055 detained children, assisting more than 1,000 children on any given day

Spent 26,000 hours providing legal services in 2018 at one detention center alone in Karnes County, Texas

Crafted a broader support network for clients across the country through pro-bono referrals, attorney mentorship, and funding

Recruited and trained 292 pro bono attorneys to provide quality free legal services to low income immigrants

Engaged in rapid response legal advocacy to reunite and free families during the family separation crisis

Successfully fought for asylum for LGBTQ+ migrants who had traveled a 2,500-mile caravan
We hired 137 new employees in 2018, including 80 for our legal programs—nearly tripling our staff size, and opened three new offices since in Houston, Dallas and San Antonio, for a total of 10 offices.

While staying true to our Texas roots, we developed a national embrace and voice through public and media outreach, as well as an expanded presence across Texas, Los Angeles, Arizona, and New York. We added key departments and expanded our vision on what we, and the communities we serve, can create together.

We continued fighting to ensure the safety and legal rights of the most vulnerable: unaccompanied children; LGBTQ+ individuals; survivors of domestic abuse, violent crime, and human trafficking; people at risk of deportation; and others seeking safe harbor in our country. And we worked to make our country a more humane, welcoming place.

Our new social services team ensures we offer our clients holistic support—whether they need help with transportation, housing, health care, understanding their rights, or simply securing their first pair of shoes in the United States. In 2018 we also paid $2 million in bonds to release hundreds of families and individuals from detention.

Our new litigation team launched high-impact lawsuits. We sued the government for illegally restricting asylum and prepared our 2019 suit against private prison operator GEO Group for illegally re-separating 13 families.

Our new advocacy team proactively elevated human stories and changed the national conversation around immigration. We are also building a policy operation to push for more humane laws that reflect our country’s values.

Our work is far from finished. As we reckon with fresh assaults against immigrants daily, the challenges we face are daunting. The government is currently detaining too many children, and families are still being separated. The government regularly announces new ways to forcibly reject people seeking safety in our country as they demonize those already here. People are dying in detention. Those with serious medical conditions—including children—get no reprieve from deportation.

Our added capacity means we’re more equipped than ever to take on these barbaric policies and the animus behind them. But the need continues to grow. With your help, we’ll remain nimble and prepared for whatever comes, and we will be able to take the lead to define our future together.
REUNITING FAMILIES

RAICES led rapid response when families were being torn apart by a new “zero tolerance” policy.

Last May, the Trump administration did the unthinkable to migrant families seeking safe harbor in the U.S.: a new “zero tolerance” policy criminalized them and ripped children away from their parents.

Our government held children in chain-link pens while it locked up their parents in jails many miles away. Thousands of families fleeing violence, poverty, and abuse in their home countries were traumatized anew. An unknown number of children were ultimately orphaned.

Cruelty is the point, and this policy epitomized it. From day one of “zero tolerance”—and long before—RAICES was there. Our staff and attorneys were already on the ground at the border and in detention centers. When the new policy hit, we took on every case we could to help reunite—and free—detained families. As the government continued to separate families, RAICES also launched a national hotline, helping hundreds of people locate and reconnect with their children and loved ones who had been separated in detention.

Darlin Suazo, a mother from Honduras, was one of our clients. Upon arrival, immigration officials tore her 13-year-old daughter from her and took her to the South Texas Detention Center in Pearsall, Texas. There she was placed in the “hielera,” or “freezer”—a brutally cold room packed with mothers separated from their children. Toilets were in the same room where the mothers slept on top of each other, covered in foil blankets. Children were put into a separate hielera.

Darlin was later moved to the “perrera” or “dog kennel,” which was so cold it was difficult to move or speak. The officers called her “Morena,” or “black girl,” rather than use her name. While detained, Darlin spoke with her daughter just twice in two months. It was unbearable. “It felt as if someone had ripped a piece of my heart,” Darlin said.

Over the phone, her daughter despaired. “I can’t stand this anymore here,” she said. “I want to leave, Mommy. I want to be with you...I can’t take it anymore! ... Where are you? When will I see you?”

“Don’t cry,” Darlin told her daughter. “And be sure you behave, wherever you are.”

Her daughter worried she would not remember what her mother looked like; she tried to picture her face but could not. Officers transporting her to reunite with Darlin misread her paperwork and told her that her mother didn’t want her anymore. They said Darlin had signed a document choosing to be deported, and turned the bus around to bring her daughter back to detention. She screamed and cried for her mother.

RAICES stepped in and took on Darlin’s case. After a two-month fight, RAICES got Darlin out of Pearsall and reunited her with her daughter. They cried as they embraced, and for much of that day the two could not be separated. They were both traumatized by the experience, but thankful they were together.

Our work was far from done. Upon reuniting with her mother, Darlin’s daughter told her that many children were alone, and were always crying. “There are a lot more children still left in the cages,” she said.

She was right. Even as headlines subside, the need remains great: As of June 2019, over 13,200 children were detained, and families are still being separated. RAICES continues to stand by their side, fighting to reunite and free families.

In most family separation cases, the government refuses to reunite families unless the parents in detention pay a bond for release. RAICES expanded its bond program in 2018 with the goal of paying bonds for everyone who had been separated. To release families, RAICES paid more than $2 million to release 276 detainees from 49 detention centers in 20 states.

These efforts led to the reunification of more than 103 families.

More than 400 parents were deported without their children, and hundreds more remain separated.
In 2018, our children’s program completed more than 516 individual cases, and offered “know your rights” trainings and legal counsel to more than 5,055 children held by U.S. Health and Human Services. These included both unaccompanied children and increasing numbers of children who had been separated from a parent or guardian. Our family detention team also provided legal counsel to 8,169 children being held together with a parent within ICE’s for-profit prison regime.

While we push steadfastly for each of our clients, tens of thousands of children remain in government custody. And since the Trump administration’s immigration crackdown, it has become harder to win cases for children to remain in the U.S. “One of the biggest challenges is that many children are being treated as if they don’t have the right to apply for asylum,” says Pablo Rodriguez, Director of Detained Children’s Services. “Countless roadblocks, countless changes in rules and policies are making it more and more difficult for the most vulnerable of immigrants to get legal status.”

Sarah Valdez, Director of Released Children’s Services, agrees. “We are having to work harder for smaller victories,” she says. But “just because it got harder doesn’t mean we’ll stop trying. I tell the kids I’ll keep fighting for you no matter what.”

EMPOWERING UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

Safety, respect, and representation for all young people in our country.

For decades, RAICES has stood beside unaccompanied children crossing the border who would otherwise face immigration court alone. With more children fleeing violence, abuse, and poverty crossing the border—and with the Trump administration launching new attacks on migrants of all ages—unaccompanied children need our help now more than ever.

To ensure these children can ultimately have a peaceful and successful life, they need to have a fighting chance to win their case in court. The Trump administration seems intent on ensuring the opposite: In May 2018, just as it ramped up its family separation policy, it decided to halt funding for legal representation of released unaccompanied children.

While we had relied on those funds, the idea of halting our work with children was simply not an option. Within 24 hours of receiving the news, we devised a plan to continue all operations, fully staffed through what became our Legal Representation, Education, and Advocacy Fund (LEAF)—which wouldn’t be dependent on government funding. LEAF works to ensure that children coming to the U.S. can receive individualized legal representation both in detention centers and once they are released. Immigrants who are represented are up to five times more likely to establish a right to remain in the U.S. than those who are not.

Because there’s no right to court-appointed counsel in immigration proceedings, even when the defendants are children, 76% of unaccompanied kids had to go to immigration court alone before 2018. The need for representation is only intensifying: The government has detained more unaccompanied children from September 2018 to September 2019 than during any other period on record.

The government has been putting unaccompanied children, many of whom are victims of trauma, in jail-like settings, or at best in cramped holding facilities. Some detention centers house children in cells with inadequate food, water and sanitation; others contain frigid holding pens with no social services; other facilities’ staff has not been adequately screened.

When these children are transferred into shelters or foster homes, we work around the clock to reunite them with their families, and to improve conditions while they wait. We support children of all ages, from newborn babies to 17-year-olds in danger of transfer to adult detention.

RAICES provides a range of services, from ensuring children understand their rights to representation at deportation proceedings and explaining their options, to assisting them with life after they’ve been released from government custody.

We inform children they have the right to be respected by border patrol, the right to be protected by the police in the U.S., and the right to pursue legal status in the U.S.
Supporting Our Clients Beyond the Courtroom

RAICES has long been serving the needs of our clients beyond legal representation. In 2018, we were able to build the capacity to provide this additional support—which we call “universal representation”—on a systematic basis.

We are there for our clients after their cases resolve—whether they are released from detention, successful in applying for asylum, or facing deportation. We want to ensure that whatever the outcome of their case, they have what they need to write the next chapter of their lives.

Whether it’s temporary housing, access to mental health services and medical care, access to basic travel needs, or just someone to listen and understand, our staff and volunteers remain by our clients’ side on their journey. For those acclimating to a new life in the U.S., we hold cultural events that build community, along with informational sessions on topics like how local government operates, and college nights for undocumented youth.

We had previously provided these “wraparound services” on a more ad hoc basis; now we are building the infrastructure to touch our clients’ lives on a much greater scale. We’ve been able to jump in to help groups of migrants proactively, so we can be more effective from the beginning, versus reacting to situations that could have been handled sooner.

LGBTQ+ Migrants: Ensuring Safe Passage—and the Chance for a Better Life

When RAICES heard Trump’s anti-immigrant rhetoric in the run-up to the midterm elections—calling a caravan of Central American migrants a dangerous “invasion”—we acted quickly.

We provided a counternarrative in the media, advocating for our new clients’ human rights, and worked to ensure their safety and well being on both sides of the border.

We were prepared. On the ground last fall in Mexico City, we learned that a group of LGBTQ+ migrants were approaching the border in advance of a much larger group originating in Honduras. Without hesitation, we mobilized to help. We had not previously crossed the border to support asylum seekers there, but we knew if we succeeded we could make a difference. And with added capacity in the wake of the “zero tolerance” policy fallout, we had the capacity to take on something new.

Members of the group had been traveling as part of a broader caravan comprised of others fleeing violence, political persecution, and poverty—all traveling up to 2,500 miles to the U.S. Calling themselves La Comunidad, the breakaway group of about 80 people, including several children, had faced abuse, death threats, harassment, and forced prostitution in their home countries. They planned to seek asylum in the U.S. as members of a persecuted class.

A team of attorneys, advocates, and legal assistants from RAICES met members of La Comunidad in Mexico City to help them reach the border and beyond. One of them was a transgender woman in her mid-20s named Estrellita Escobar who had traveled thousands of miles from her home in Honduras. There, in 2018, she had been brutally beaten and nearly thrown off a bridge. She decided she must leave.

Estrellita joined the caravan traveling to the U.S. border, journeying hand in hand with other women. But the caravan itself wasn’t a safe place for her: She and other LGBTQ+ travelers faced discrimination and harassment, and were denied food and transportation. They banded together to protect themselves.

To help Estrellita and her fellow travelers complete their journey to the border, RAICES secured bus tickets to Tijuana and sent attorneys, legal assistants, and outreach staff to Tijuana to meet them upon arrival there. We assisted with housing in Tijuana while the group waited to be processed. We collaborated with other local and national organizations to provide food and coordinate security, medicine, and mental health services. We also shared their stories with national media and across social media. There, voices from La Comunidad offered the true stories of their journey, which stood in stark contrast to the White House’s attempts to demonize and dehumanize.

After waiting for a month for her number to be called, Estrellita was placed in detention. She languished for five months in the South Texas Detention Center. There she was harassed by the agents who were guarding the detainees, and told by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) that she and her traveling companions did not have the right to their interview for asylum.

“We got really worried about our future,” said Estrellita. “Our court sessions began, and we were told we were getting deported.” Then our team arrived. “RAICES got every single one of our girls a lawyer,” she said. “They listened to our stories, they filled out our asylum applications.”

Winning asylum in the U.S. is incredibly difficult; there is a high legal standard even when you have an attorney. But we continued to push, and so did members of La Comunidad. Estrellita, along with ten other transgender women from the caravan, ultimately prevailed in her asylum case.

Today, Estrellita is assisting her attorney, RAICES’ Cristian Sanchez, and helping other LGBTQ+ people get acquainted with a new life in the U.S. outside detention. “I want to welcome those to the U.S. who do not have someone here to find their family,” she says.
In 2018, RAICES started to build something else essential to realizing our vision: the capacity to change laws and policies, as well as the cultural context in which we operate. We are now better than ever at anticipating what’s coming, and have the ability to be effective on a whole new level. Rather than merely reacting to crises, we can strategize and set the agenda before they occur. We can lead in answering the question: What kind of America do we want to be?

Holding Our Government and Private Prison Operators Accountable

We built a new litigation department to take on big fights that affect our clients’ lives, and help define the very nature of our democracy. Some are cases on behalf of individual clients that may set precedent for others, or actions against companies or government agencies that shine a light on, and combat, inhumane practices.

In 2018, we:

- Sued the Trump administration’s Department of Homeland Security for failing to keep track of who is in its custody—exacerbating the family separation crisis.
- Sued the Trump administration for its illegal attempt to restrict access to asylum at the border. The case moved forward in the courts in the summer of 2019.
- Built our case, filed in 2019, on behalf of a mentally ill client who became suicidal after being sexually assaulted and placed in isolation for nearly nine months. He remains in detention but is now receiving regular treatment, counseling, and medication.
- Laid the groundwork for our 2019 lawsuit against private prison company GEO Group for retaliating against 13 detained families who were on hunger strike. GEO Group forcibly and illegally re-separated the families, loading children onto a bus to a facility hours away from their fathers.
Advocating for a Better America

Our legal work doesn’t exist in a vacuum. To create fundamental change, we need to win in the courts but also mobilize in the streets and in the halls of power. And we need to counter the toxic narrative that has emerged in this country around immigration. We’ve woven this advocacy work into our organization’s framework throughout our 33-year history, but in 2018 we were able to create a dedicated advocacy operation.

Our team educates and mobilizes the community around issues and campaigns, and tells our stories to influence public opinion, the political environment, and our culture as a whole. We are building capacity to push for policies that reflect the best of American values.

RAICES is:

- Leading the public discussion on immigration reform and encouraging candidates to adopt RAICES’ long-held positions on this issue. The newly-formed RAICES Action Fund, an I.R.C. 501(c)(4) organization, will also take an active role in the legislative and political process.
- Amplifying our message and changing the narrative: engagement with the public and influencers through media outreach, social media campaigns, events, and public art.

In 2018, we:

- Grew our Twitter followers from 2,000 followers to 77,000 (more than 171,000 as of November 2019). With the largest social media presence of any immigrant rights organization in the U.S., we are building community and advocating more effectively in the public arena.
- Secured more national news coverage than at any point in the organization’s history.
- Built a video operation that shares our clients’ stories with millions of people around the world—and offers information to migrants arriving at the border.
- Hosted an event in Washington D.C. with leading politicians, including Bernie Sanders, Joaquin Castro, Cory Booker, Chuck Schumer, and Eric Swalwell.
- Used our public presence to advocate accountability—including in the tech industry. We rejected a $250,000 donation from Salesforce because they have a $50 million technology contract with Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), generating national news coverage and putting pressure on the company.
Exposing Abuse, Fighting for Refugees’ Rights

When we learned of the government’s sudden plans to deport a group of Somali, Kenyan, Gambian, and Sudanese refugees—many of whom had been living in the U.S. since they were children—RAICES mobilized immediately. Last March, we launched a multi-faceted campaign aimed at defending their rights and shining a light on the abuse they endured in detention. ICE had put 92 of the refugees on a plane to deport them the previous December, only to turn around and bring them back to U.S. detention due to “logistical problems.” During the flight they were shackled for more than 40 hours, including 23 hours sat on the tarmac in Dakar, and denied the use of clean toilets.

That was only the beginning. While detained in for-profit facilities including the West Texas Detention Facility in Sierra Blanca, Texas, refugees faced unprovoked physical assaults by staff, sexual abuse, racial slurs, threats, pepper spray, solitary confinement, prolonged shackling, denial of medical and mental health care, and unsanitary conditions.

RAICES was outraged at this treatment of our fellow human beings—people who had sought safe harbor in our country. Along with our public outreach and media campaigns, we led the refugees’ legal defense. We litigated in federal court before we had a litigation department, demanding an investigation and a reprieve from deportation. We filed motions up to the last hour. We ultimately were unable to prevent their forced removal from the U.S., but RAICES brought national attention to the injustices of their arrests, traumatic detention experiences, and unjust separation from their families.

On the Front Line at a Moment’s Notice

Two days before Christmas in 2017, we got a call when the San Antonio police arrested the driver of a tractor-trailer smuggling 12 migrants. After the police released the migrants to the local Catholic Charities, RAICES quickly came to their side. We have provided legal representation and other support since that night. That help is now as essential as ever: In November 2018, the Texas Attorney General sued San Antonio for releasing the migrants, allegedly violating the state’s Senate Bill 4 (SB 4)—the so-called “show me your papers” law that forces local authorities to act like federal immigration officers. The case, which is still pending, has become a test case for the legality of SB 4. Our clients’ immigration status hangs in the balance in the meantime, but they have our full and unflagging commitment to fight for them to continue to build their lives in the U.S.
Financial Summary

REFUGEE AND IMMIGRANT CENTER FOR EDUCATION AND LEGAL SERVICES

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THANK YOU

We cannot overstate the importance of funding at this very moment when the issue of immigrant rights factors so prominently on the national stage. RAICES has been deluged with clients over the past year due to the overwhelming need for legal and social services for vulnerable asylum seekers and families. It is because of the partnership and generosity of philanthropic donors, that we can mobilize the necessary resources to meet this urgent call for help.
Executive leadership & Board of Directors

Jonathan Ryan, CEO / President
Erika Andiola, Chief Advocacy Officer
Brendan Colthurst, Chief Technology Officer
Liz Dunn, Chief Development Officer
Sara Fairley, Chief Social Programs Officer
Michelle Garza, Chief Legal Programs Officer
Julia Harvell, Chief Administration Officer
Nathan Johnson, Chief Financial Officer

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Nick Garza, Member
John Agather, Member
Dolores Schroeder, Member
Jayci Giaccone, Member
Rey Saldana, Member

Join Us

Fund the Fight
This is a crucial time in the fight for immigrant and refugee rights. We believe that no child should walk into an immigration court alone, families should remain together, and no one should be kept in a detention center.

Join the Conversation
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www.raicestexas.org