

Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights



Annual Overview 2023

Table of Contents

3

A Message from Our Executive Director

4

About the Young Center

8

Child Advocate Program

16

Technical Assistance Program

19

Policy Program

23

Elizabeth Frankel Fellowship

24

Communications Work

25

Financials

26

Young Center Team

A Message from the Executive Director



As we near almost 20 years of the Young Center’s vital advocacy to advance and protect immigrant children’s rights, I am inspired by the ways our community has come together in 2023 to strategically map our plans to deepen the Young Center’s impact and truly live out our values in the immediate years to come. Together, alongside the Young Center’s Board of Directors, we crafted a 5-Year Strategic Plan that not only sets forth our big picture visions, goals and aspirations, but also tangible ways we will enhance our support for children between now and 2027 that are critically grounded in our **values of courage, equity and justice, child-centeredness, accompaniment, and community.**

This past year was marked by critical efforts to formalize organizational partnerships that ensure our support for children extends beyond just their time in federal custody. After officially launching our Technical Assistance Program only a year ago in late 2022, our team sprang into action, investing in relationships with leading organizations outside the immigrant advocacy spaces, such as Casey Family Programs and Seneca Family of Agencies, whose substantive areas of practice intersect with immigrant children. Through this allyship and collective advocacy, we continue to ground the Young Center as one element in a larger ecosystem that is working together to ensure immigrant children and their families receive holistic support.

In 2023, we also proudly introduced a new pilot initiative —led by our team of strategic communications experts — that invests in creative, ethical, and safe storytelling initiatives in which immigrant children can engage. Our Ethical Storytelling Pilot is rooted not only in our commitment to honor immigrant children’s voices but also in our responsibility to create tangible opportunities for children to share about their lives, experiences, and stories in their own words.

There is no doubt that these were major accomplishments in 2023; and while we celebrate these extraordinary strides forward, we are also holding space to show up for one another and our partners through immense grief. The tragic deaths of Anadith Danay Reyes Alvarez, Jismary Alejandra Barboza Gonzalez, Ángel Eduardo Maradiaga Espinoza –only some of the immigrant children who died in 2023– were the fatal consequence of our nation’s increasingly restrictive immigration policies that continue to make it more dangerous for individuals, families, and children to seek safety in the U.S. Whether it’s inside border facilities like the one in which Anadith passed away, or inside the mass charter buses on which Texas has cruelly placed families, including Jismary and her mother, children and their loved ones have faced deadly conditions without access to essential human services, including proper medical care.

Part of our effort to fight for justice for these children and their families requires us all to recognize the ways our country’s immigration policy increasingly values “curbing” immigration more than protecting human life. When we come together to acknowledge this and share in the sorrow and grief of this work, we also create opportunities for us to see ourselves as part of a much more expansive community that can lean on each other and fuel one another in the pursuit of **justice.**

Immigrant children, as we know, exist in and are impacted by a much bigger ecosystem than just federal custody. The challenges they experienced before and the hurdles they will experience after custody require solutions rooted in **community.** The partnerships we have fostered over this year and the intersectional work we will undoubtedly engage in in the years to come will ensure that immigrant children, no matter where they land, are met with the care, compassion, and tenderness they deserve.

With Gratitude,

Gladis E. Molina Alt

About the Young Center

Our Mission

The Young Center for Immigrant Children’s Rights protects and advances the rights and best interests of immigrant children according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and state and federal law.

Our Values

The Young Center is committed to supporting and serving immigrant children in every facet of our work. From our external mission to our internal culture, policies, and priorities, we are guided by our core values at every level.

Accompaniment

We partner with others with compassion and strive to dismantle power dynamics inherent in our relationships.



Child-Centered

We amplify the voices of the children and youth we serve and seek to uphold their right to self-determination.

Community

We empower others to show up and participate as their authentic selves, and in doing so, cultivate a sense of community grounded in belonging.



Courage

We dare to fight for a just and humane immigration system through innovative advocacy grounded in interdisciplinary practice.



Equity and Justice

We honor the diverse array of experiences, perspectives, and identities every person holds—especially the children for whom we advocate.



Our Work

The Young Center is a human rights organization that advocates for the rights and best interests of immigrant children. Our goal is to change both immigration policy and practice, so immigrant children are recognized first as children and their best interests are considered in every decision. We do this through three programs:

Our Child Advocate Program (CAP)

Provides independent Child Advocates to vulnerable unaccompanied and separated immigrant children who are detained in federal custody and after their release from custody. Our attorneys and social workers, along with trained bilingual volunteers, are appointed to identify and advocate for the best interests of individual children — on issues including custody, placement, reunification with family, legal relief, and repatriation — to ensure that all decision-makers consider the children’s best interests at each phase of their cases. We accomplish this by increasing our Child Advocates’ independence in and access to the U.S. immigration system; increasing agency of the children we serve; and increasing awareness and implementation of our [child rights paradigm](#).

Our Technical Assistance Program (TAP)

Works to ensure immigrant children and non-citizen youth involved in child welfare and other state court systems have equitable access to safety, legal relief, and connection to their family, language, and culture. To achieve that goal, TAP seeks to build the capacity of state court attorneys, caseworkers, and government officials to navigate the inevitable complexities that arise when immigrant children become involved in state court systems, and to support them in providing more holistic and effective services for immigrant children.

Our Policy Program

Builds on the experiences of CAP and TAP to advocate for systemic changes that would incorporate a “best interests of the child” standard into practice, policy, and immigration law. Through advocacy with Congress, federal agencies, and the courts, our Policy team advocates for family unity, for children’s safety in custody, for fundamentally fair immigration proceedings, and for policies that protect the rights of all immigrant children and youth including children with disabilities, children of color, and LGBTQIA+ children.

“These children come here full of dreams already. My hope is that they know that they are not alone, they are loved, and they are as worthy as anybody else is of pursuing those dreams.” - Jocelyn Kmet, Volunteer Child Advocate

Highlights from 2023

JANUARY – Our “[Preserving Family Ties](#)” report is featured in an [op-ed](#) published in The Hill by Physicians for Human Rights, which calls for children’s unlimited contact with families.



FEBRUARY – We secure a 5-year contract with the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to provide Child Advocates to unaccompanied and separated children and youth across the country.



MARCH – We release our “[Fast not Fair Report](#)” report demanding change to the system where the government documents children’s behavior in custody, and finalize our 5-year strategic plan.



APRIL – We receive the Mutual of America Award and co-host a convening on serving unaccompanied youth with mental health disabilities.

MAY – We publicly launch our Organizational Values.

JUNE – Young Center win! After publication of our 2022 Preserving Family Ties report, ORR announces a policy change that will require daily contact between unaccompanied children in custody and their families.

JULY – Young Center win! The Department of Justice releases official guidance for the role of Child Advocates in immigration court.



AUGUST – 2nd Cohort of Elizabeth Frankel Fellows wraps up their fellowship, including their work with teenagers in federal custody.

SEPTEMBER – We train over 120 immigration judges who oversee children’s cases across the country on the role of Child Advocates and children’s best interests.

OCTOBER – 350 supporters participate in our Waymakers Race and raise \$98K, while we honor Dr. Selma Yznaga with the Waymaker Award, and secure a significant expansion of our ORR contract to serve nearly 40% more children in future years.



NOVEMBER – We publish an [op-ed](#) in the New York Times calling for justice for separated families.

DECEMBER – We mobilize supporters across the country to demand that Congress protect asylum-seeking children and families instead of using them as bargaining chips in budget fights.

“My dream for unaccompanied immigrant children is that they feel safe and welcome in the US. I also hope that their linguistic and cultural needs are respected and met.” - Sarah Nelson, Volunteer Child Advocate

Child Advocate Program

Our Child Advocate Program (CAP) provides independent Child Advocates to unaccompanied and separated children in federal detention (under the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement – ORR) and after their release. Our Child Advocates **accompany** children while they remain in detention, separated from their families, and as they face immigration proceedings. We serve survivors of persecution, trafficking, abuse, and other crimes; particularly young children; pregnant and parenting youth; children and youth with complex medical conditions or disabilities; children at risk of turning 18 while in custody; and other particularly vulnerable youth.

CAP advocates for children’s best interests by submitting written and oral Best Interests Determinations (BIDs) to immigration judges, asylum officers, government officials, staff in facilities where children are placed, lawyers, and other service providers. BIDs are **child-centered** recommendations rooted in state child welfare law, federal immigration law, international human rights instruments, and the science of child development. We advocate for children to be quickly placed with family, or in family-like settings in the **community**, and have access to the support and services they need and deserve while detained and after their release. We also advocate with decision makers to respect children’s individual identities, culture, language, history, and wishes.

CAP is grounded in our interdisciplinary approach, which combines the strategic legal knowledge and advocacy of our attorneys with the trauma-informed and **child-centered** expertise of our social workers. Our Child Advocates provide culturally responsive advocacy using a rights-based paradigm to minimize the risk that bias, stereotypes, paternalism, and subjective values influence BIDs. Our paradigm takes into account widely accepted best interests’ principles for protecting a child’s safety, and expressed interests, as well as the child’s rights to family integrity, liberty, healthy development, and identity.



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2016 Child Rights Paradigm

Child Trafficking Survivors

This year, we worked with over 120 children who were referred to us because they likely experienced trafficking in their home countries or on their journeys to the US. (However, in many other cases, we identified indications of trafficking after our appointment.) Youth who’ve survived trafficking are eligible for significant support services after their release from ORR, including vital medical and mental health care services. But to access these, they must disclose their history of trafficking.

In each case, we appointed Child Advocates who visited weekly with the youth to build trust, so they understood our role as allies in their struggle for safety. In many cases, ORR transferred these teens to more restrictive programs known as residential treatment centers (RTCs). Although RTCs are designed to provide additional support to children with higher mental health needs, they often lead to prolonged detention. Our Child Advocates worked with the youth to file BIDs that argued against transfer to RTCs and for the youth’s direct release to family, so they could receive services in the **community**.

In multiple cases, the government’s process for approving a child’s release failed to account for their Indigenous identities, something our advocates challenged at every turn. When one teenager’s reunification with his mother stalled because she spoke an Indigenous language and only received forms in Spanish and English, we found a community-based agency to work with her to quickly submit the documents needed to secure her son’s release. Without this advocacy, release from custody stalls, increasing children’s isolation, causing further trauma, and delaying their ability to live in communities and access services designed for trafficking survivors.

Today, our BIDs have helped many of these children leave custody and reunify with their parents. They have enrolled in schools and started to receive referrals to physical and mental health providers. Those opportunities greatly reduce the risk that children will be vulnerable to additional exploitation.

EOIR Formally Recognizes Role of Child Advocates in Immigration Proceedings

In July, the Executive Office of Immigration Review (EOIR) issued [new guidance](#) that formally recognizes the role of Child Advocates in immigration court. The guidance affirms the role of Child Advocates to **accompany** children to all immigration courts and to advocate for their best interests on issues before the court. Although Child Advocates have submitted BIDs to immigration courts since our founding, we have had to win the right to accompany and advocate for children. Now, we have EOIR’s clear support.

“I understand arriving to a brand-new country is overwhelming, and they may feel lonely, especially because they are so young. I want them to remember a friendly face throughout their life experience in the new country, so they realize support and encouragement will always be around, even when their loved ones are far away.” - Gizelle Romo, Volunteer Child Advocate

Safe Repatriation Program

Our immigration laws and policies overwhelmingly favor government officials trying to deport children over children’s safety. Over the years, this imbalance of power has led to many immigrant children being sent back to the very dangers they fled.

Our Safe Repatriation work attempts to intervene during these life-altering processes to ensure key decision-makers in a child’s case understand all the available information about a child’s safety, culture, and family before making a decision about repatriation. Our work strives for an immigration system that is **equitable** and **just** for all children and relies heavily on our ability to build **community** with international partners who are equally committed to our mission and the safety of the children we serve.

In 2023, our safe repatriation team worked on dozens of cases for children from across the world. They completed 67 safety assessments and consultations for children who wanted to return but who may have faced safety concerns, or who were at risk of returning against their will to their countries of origin. In some of these assessments, we conducted detailed international home studies. In other cases, we collaborated with partner organizations to gather supporting documents or information for the child’s case. This work allowed Child Advocates to recommend a variety of child-specific safeguards for children returning to their countries, including joint repatriation with family members, travel during daylight hours, and travel with officials who can meet the children’s needs or speak children’s primary language. The work also supported BIDs that argued for children to remain permanently in the U.S. because of specific dangers they would face in their home country.



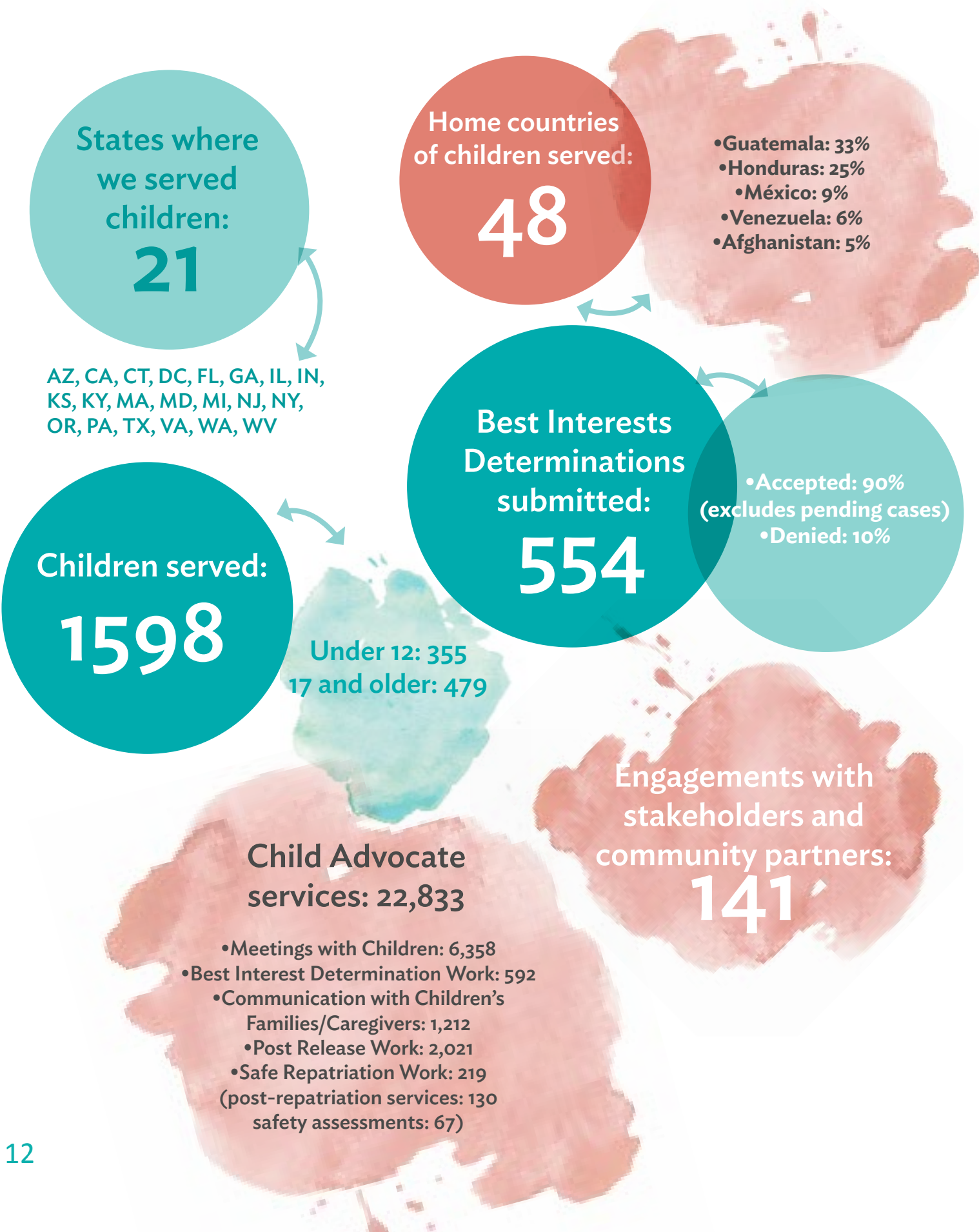
Ana’s* Story (*denotes pseudonym)

We served as Child Advocates for a five-year-old child, Ana* from Central America. Ana traveled with her mother to the U.S. to reunite with her father. They spent three months in Mexico before they attempted to cross the border, and when they did, they were forced to separate. Just as they tried to enter the U.S., a man threatened to harm them. Ana’s mother made the extremely difficult decision to separate from Ana in order to get Ana away from him. Ana crossed alone, was apprehended and designated as an unaccompanied immigrant child, and placed in ORR. When Ana’s mother finally arrived in the U.S., Ana’s father drove to reunite with her. On their drive back to the family’s home state, the police stopped the couple, and immigration officials deported them back to Central America.

Once Ana learned her parents were in Central America, she made her wishes clear to return home to them. Through our safety assessment, we built a strong rapport with her mother and father, which allowed us to gather critical information about Ana and her mother’s journey to the U.S., information about her parents’ location, and their wishes for Ana. Anxious to reunite with Ana, her father returned to the U.S. and began ORR’s reunification process; however, despite his efforts to secure employment and housing, the reunification process presented additional challenges to him as a newly arrived immigrant. We connected with Ana’s mother again and learned both parents agreed it was best for Ana to reunify with her father as soon as possible. The information we gathered through our safety assessment informed our advocacy in support of Ana’s release to her father. After 143 days of separation, Ana finally reunified with her father and is doing well.



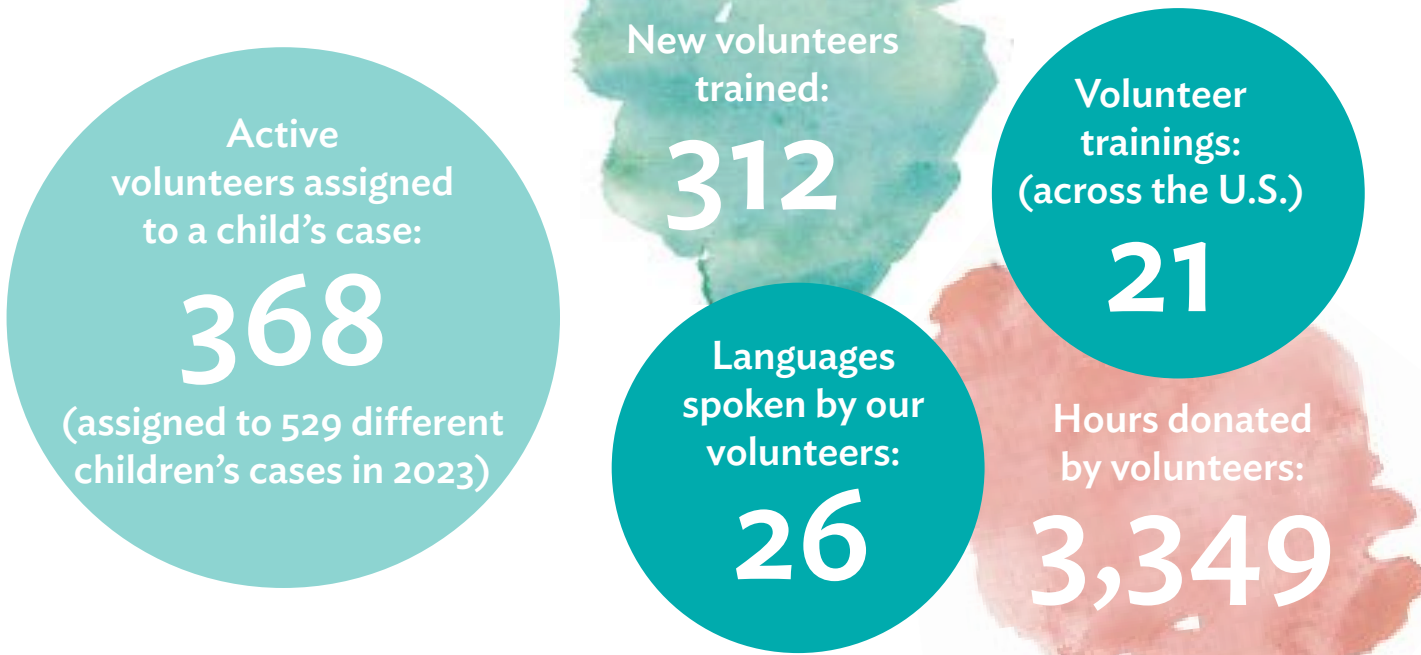
CAP by the Numbers



Volunteer Child Advocates

We recruit, train, and support bilingual and bicultural volunteers, including teachers, students, retired attorneys, and community members to serve as Volunteer Child Advocates. We pair children with a Volunteer Child Advocate based on the child's needs and the volunteer's language ability, availability, and background. As volunteers build trusting relationships with children and learn their stories through *child-centered* and child-led activities, they work with our staff to advocate for children's best interests.

Volunteers by the Numbers:



Honoring Our Invaluable Volunteers

Our work is possible thanks to the compassionate and generous support of Volunteer Child Advocates around the country who donate thousands of hours to accompany children as they face immigration proceedings. Below is a list of the volunteers who consented to share their names in this report. We are immensely grateful to every volunteer.

Aisha A Ghorl Ozaki, Alexandra Sasha Fyre, Alondra Vasquez, Andrea Cordero, Angel Diaz, Anika Kazi, Ariela Rosenstein, Ayah Hamza, Becky Teiwes, Brittany Gilroy, Caitlyn A. Roxbury, Carrie Scott, Catherine Ortiz, Cecilia Najera, Chirlie Y. Felix, Corinne Kentor, Debbie Goldberg, Denise Ramirez, Dhara Bhakta, Dulce Romero, Elisa Sipols, Elyssa Sapia, Emily A. Hunsberger, Emily Rosen, Emma Kemler, Erica Sagrans, Fabia Mirick Yazaki, Farnoush Tooma-Morvarid, Fulya Degirmenci, Gabriela Atkinson, Gabriela Arellano, Gabriela Villalobos, Georgina Valverde, Gina Hansen, Harlinah Katz Lopez, Hoomai Sayed, Isyemille Lara, Itzel Morales, Jacqueline Alcántara, Jaime Garcia Alba, Jennifer Baquedano, Jennifer Torres, Jessica Logan, Joe Pearson, Johanna Afshani, Judy Gordon, Kaitlin Decker, Karen Linares, Karen Michelle Zapata Herrera, Kathy Armstrong, Kelly Chicoma, Kimya Forouzan, Laura Lehman, Laura Amortegui, Liuska Rincon, Lois McGuire, Lorna Solis, Magda Rodriguez, Marcelo Cueva, Margot Stueber, Maria Carolina Tovar, Maria Teresa Garretton, Maria Conroy, Marina Quintanilla, Maritza M. Pozo, Mary Beth Davis, Maryam Zand, Marya Cardenas, Meghan Marx, Melissa Ludington, Michelle Veliz Vargas, Michelle Duffy, Mindy Martinez, Mohammad Hooshmand, Naddia Garcia Wiklund, Nancy Hirschhorn, Nathalie Pierroz, Nina Friedman, Noorjahan Akbar, Oghay Kherzai, Parto Jalili, Paulina Leon Trevino, Penny Fearon, Rachel Miller, Rachel Thune Real, Raj Chetty, Robin Subar, Roger Ted Johnson, S. Shane Snelson, Sandra T. Chang, Sapna Advani, Sara Poursafar, Sara Ajamian, Sarah Nelson, Shahira Asadi-Popal, Shiva Sobhani, Sonia Fragoso, Stephine Peña, Stephanie Ruiz Morales, Tal Gonzalez, Tatiana Scripnic, Taylor Lifka, Thomas P. Valenti, Tom Sanchez, Valentina Elena Bonciu, Vanessa Garcia, Vatsala Kumar, Vincent Corbett, Wanda Baker, Yessenia Cardona, and Zoe Couacaud.

A Volunteer Coordinator Reflection:

A Community of Care: Advocacy Through Accompaniment and Child-Centered Care

By Lilia Murray, Harlingen Volunteer Coordinator, with contribution from additional Volunteer Coordinators across Young Center locations.



No child should have to face our nation’s complex immigration system alone. That’s why the Young Center plays a key role in ensuring children who arrive to the U.S. alone are met with a welcoming **community** that is determined to stand in their corner and defend their rights, safety, and well-being.

Together with our volunteers, the Young Center has supported countless children in federal detention who have seen, experienced, and dealt with some of life’s toughest challenges – challenges that even adults find difficult to cope with. Yet, many of these children are put in positions where they are forced to process the trauma they’ve endured, a new environment, a new country, a new language, and new people all by themselves. Imagine how overwhelming this must feel.

As Volunteer Coordinators, we are constantly striving to equip our Volunteer Child Advocates with the tools, resources, and knowledge needed to provide meaningful support to immigrant children in detention. How we train and support our volunteers to **accompany** children directly correlates with our ability to create a nurturing environment for children in Child Advocate visits to be able to feel safe and express their wishes. Ultimately, we strive to build a **community** of volunteers who take the time to show up for children; to play, to listen, and to create space for children to simply be children.

Central to our organizational mission is the value of **accompaniment**. But what exactly does this mean and look like? In a system that too often treats children as just another case number, our Volunteer Child Advocates see children as children and focus primarily on being a consistent, caring presence during each child’s journey and to be that person that each child knows they have in their corner.

Our volunteers show up each week to listen to children and learn about all the things that make them who they are: their favorite movies and colors and games, the foods that remind them of home, their family, their hopes and dreams, their reasons for migrating. **Accompaniment** requires our volunteers to be emotionally present for each child and to remind children that their voice, experiences, and aspirations matter. To us, each child deserves to be seen holistically and for the full human being they are. A crucial aspect of our **child-centered** approach involves empowering children to lead their engagements with our volunteers. By asking children about their preferences for activities during visits, we encourage and honor their agency and autonomy. This **child-centered** approach also nurtures a sense of healing and resilience.

By fostering trust and understanding, we can create a secure space where children can share their feelings, concerns, and the uncertainties they face.



Technical Assistance Program

Our Technical Assistance Program (TAP) was created to advance the rights and best interests of immigrant/non-citizen youth involved in child welfare and other state court proceedings. These systems, while flawed across the board, especially fail immigrant children and families who face uniquely complex circumstances that require intersectional advocacy. TAP aims to address these complexities by offering culturally sensitive and trauma-informed consultations, mentorship, trainings, and resources directly to the professionals working with immigrant children in state court systems.

TAP’s goal is to help ensure immigrant children and non-citizen youth involved in child welfare and other state court systems have equitable access to legal relief, well-being, and connection to family, language, and culture.

Contract to Support Separated Families

TAP is subcontracted by Seneca Family of Agencies to provide support to attorneys and service providers working with families separated under the Trump administration’s Zero Tolerance policy. The years of separation for some families have changed their trajectories, negatively impacted relationships, or otherwise shaped children’s wishes in ways that make reunification uniquely complex. In these cases, the immigration and family law attorneys, case managers, and mental health practitioners serving these families benefit from our technical assistance. TAP offers case consultations to these service providers to help them spot issues of concern, think through strategies, and connect with critical resources to support and facilitate reunification. In 2023, TAP assisted with 61 cases.

Partnership with Casey Family Programs

In June, TAP secured a partnership with Casey Family Programs (CFP). CFP works in all 50 states and is the nation’s largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care in the U.S. This partnership brings together both organizations’ resources and knowledge for mutual benefit to evaluate and fine-tune TAP’s data collection and evaluation processes and to further hone TAP’s strategies for effecting positive systemic change in the child welfare system on behalf of immigrant children and families.

TAP by the Numbers

Total geographic areas of requests received and responded to:
20

(CA, CO, DC, FL, IL, MS, NC, NE, NJ, NM, NY, OK, OR, PA, SC, TX, VA, WA)

Tap engagements:
144

Engagements with Seneca (immigrant children separated by Zero Tolerance):

61

Engagement with Children and Families in child welfare system or other systems

83

Gabi’s* Story to Reunify with Sam*

(* denotes pseudonyms)

Over a year ago, TAP began consulting on a [child welfare case](#) centered on a Honduran grandmother’s fight for custody of her 3-year-old grandson, Sam*. When TAP first connected with Gabi*, the grandmother, it had been over a year since she had seen Sam, despite helping to raise him for the first year of his life. When his parents brought him to the U.S. to seek safety, Gabi remained in their home country but kept tabs on his development through regular video calls and photo updates. All of that changed when Sam was removed from his mother’s care and placed in a foster home.

Sam’s foster parents have made clear that if they can adopt him, they will not permit contact between Sam and his biological family, including Gabi. Gabi is now in the U.S. as an asylum seeker and fighting an extraordinarily uphill battle to adopt Sam. If Gabi does not prevail, Sam will grow up separated from family members, estranged from his culture and community. TAP wants to ensure that doesn’t happen.

Since connecting with Gabi, TAP found a family law attorney to represent her, and our Director of Policy and Litigation is serving as co-counsel on Gabi’s case. In partnership with other immigrant advocacy organizations, we helped Gabi relocate to New York. The organization Each Step Home paid for her relocation costs and identified a host for her upon arriving in New York. Each Step Home also assigned Gabi a case manager with whom TAP continues to coordinate. TAP has supported Gabi’s efforts, with her attorney, to obtain court-ordered visitation with Sam, and in the fall of 2023, Gabi had her first in-person visit with Sam in 15 months. TAP has also worked with a child psychology forensic expert to support Gabi’s efforts to win custody of Sam.



Lessons Learned

State child welfare systems across the country often act as vehicles for family policing that [disproportionately impact](#) Black and Indigenous families. Similarly, the systemic injustice immigrant families experience is exacerbated by their immigration status. The inequities they face are compounded by virtue of their engagement with two broken systems. In the nearly two years since the Young Center began developing TAP, our data shows Gabi’s experience is not unusual. The assumptions and biases she faces echo those playing out in other cases and in other state child welfare systems.

TAP is committed to building a *just* world where no child is ever subjected to the harms of detention, deportation, and/or family separation. When these harms are inflicted by systems such as the child welfare system, we fight for *justice*, and we stand in defense of children’s rights to grow up connected to their families, *communities*, and culture, because far too often, the odds are stacked against loving family members like Gabi.

Policy Program

Our Policy Program advocates for systemic change, building on learnings from our work serving children. We advocate for policies and systems that prioritize children’s best interests, which include promoting family unity, ensuring children are safe in custody, and ensuring children’s access to a range of legal protections and immigration relief in the U.S. Our advocacy includes ensuring children can safely express their full identities, whether they are LGBTQIA+, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, or from other marginalized groups; and ensuring children are protected as they transition into adulthood.



Advocacy Results in ORR Policy Change that Grant Children Daily Phone Calls with Family

For years, CAP advocated for children to have more telephone and video contact with family. After examining the issue with CAP staff, our Policy team authored a [report in 2022](#) documenting how ORR facilities limit the amount of phone time children have to speak with family to the so-called “minimum” of two 10-minute calls per week. Limited contact with family can cause great stress and anxiety. It can also cause family ruptures that hamper long-term relationships and impact children’s ability to safely repatriate. Our report recommended children have unlimited contact with family, or at a minimum, that ORR ensure children have guaranteed 30 minutes of daily contact with family, preferably by video. As such, in June 2023, ORR announced a formal policy change ensuring children have a right to daily contact with family and a preference for video calls whenever possible!

Exposure of Punitive Policy Leads to Change in SIR Policy

In late 2022, we released another [report](#), which illustrates the treatment of children in ORR facilities and the over-use of significant incident reports (SIRs). SIRs are forms ORR has used to document incidents from disclosures of past abuse to minor rule infractions or behavioral challenges. SIRs rarely indicate a supportive or rehabilitative response by ORR to an incident, such as considering whether the child may need accommodation or screening for disability. Instead, ORR relies on SIRs to punish children, exacerbating their trauma and prolonging their time in detention. As a result of this report, in June 2023, ORR announced a revised SIR policy incorporating many of our recommendations. There is still work to do, but this policy win for children, particularly children with disabilities, would not have happened without our reporting and advocacy.

Securing Greater Protections for Children with Disabilities

This year we took a strong, disability-focused stand against opening new “secure facilities” (beds in juvenile jails), which disproportionately house children with disabilities and have consistently been sites of abusive, punitive, and traumatizing treatment of children. In early 2023, the last secure ORR facility closed after years of litigation, which created an opportunity for us to push ORR to remove secure facilities from its network. We successfully challenged ORR’s efforts to bring on new secure providers by organizing more than 35 disability rights, child rights, and juvenile justice organizations to sign a letter detailing the harms of secure custody for youth.



“I choose to support unaccompanied immigrant children as an act of rebellion against a world that insists on creating divisions and promoting fear towards those who look, speak, pray, or think differently from us.”
- Magali Montes, Volunteer Child Advocate

Comments on a Proposed Regulation to Govern Children’s Care & Custody

In 2023, our Policy team devoted significant efforts to influence a new regulation governing children’s care in custody. This regulation known as the “ORR Foundational Rule” will replace the majority of the Flores Settlement Agreement, which sets standards of care for children in federal custody and requires independent oversight of ORR. Flores has provided a critical role in ORR’s oversight, so it is essential for the Foundational Rule to raise the standards of care for children and provide oversight mechanisms to ensure children in ORR are protected. As such, our Policy team worked tirelessly to provide detailed feedback on every aspect of the proposed regulation, working in *community* with other immigration and child rights experts as well as experts in related fields such as child welfare, child health, child justice and disability rights. The Policy team also generated hundreds of sign-ons to these comments.

Advancing Reproductive Justice for Youth:

We partnered with other advocacy organizations to draft and submit a joint comment focused specifically on recommendations to improve proposed regulations that address the treatment and rights of pregnant and parenting youth in ORR. Over 90 organizations and academics from the immigrant rights, reproductive rights, health and justice, juvenile justice, and disability rights spaces signed onto the comment.

Identifying Stronger Protections for LGBTQIA+ Children:

We also led a comment advocating for ORR to include regulations in the Foundational Rule that address the unique needs and issues faced by LGBTQIA+ youth in government custody. More than 50 organizations and academics signed the comment. To our knowledge, it was the first comment that has ever been submitted to ORR that focuses on advancing the needs and rights of LGBTQIA+ youth in ORR custody.

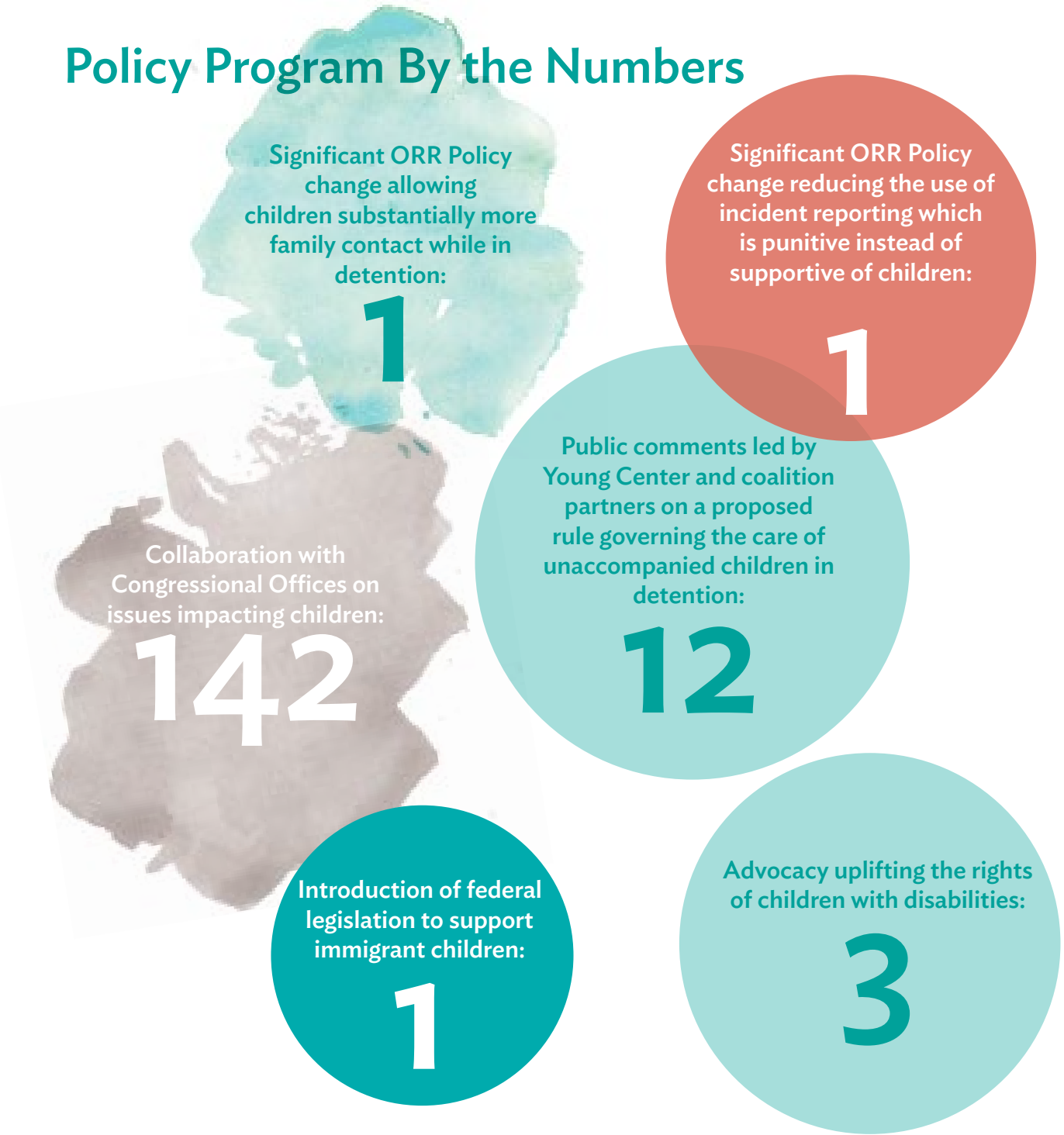


“Supporting unaccompanied immigrant children is important to me because it is my way of bridging the inequality that many people in this world are born with. Supporting them through such a tough time in their lives may bring a light on their journey and help them pave their path to opportunity.” - Claudia Diamante, Volunteer Child Advocate

Influencing Congressional Decision-Making

The Young Center is a trusted adviser on a range of key policy issues impacting children and collaborated with Congressional offices 142 times in 2023, a record high for our Policy Team. When the nation confronted critical inflection points on policy choices, and actions to limit the exploitation of migrant child labor, Members of Congress proactively reached out to us for education, technical assistance, and advice. We partnered with Senate champions to ensure legislative proposals meant to protect children did not have unintended consequences, and prepared witnesses and questions for hearings on child labor exploitation. In addition, Congressional offices reached out to us to prepare their Members for two separate delegations to the Southern Border.

Policy Program By the Numbers



Elizabeth Frankel Fellowship Program

We created the Elizabeth Frankel Fellowship to honor the memory of our former Associate Director, a staunch child rights advocate, and to train a new generation of attorneys to fight for unaccompanied immigrant children’s rights. The Fellowship enables fellows to spend 10 weeks training to zealously advocate for children, and to carry on Liz’s vision of honoring children’s wishes through careful, strategic advocacy.

In 2023, we welcomed José Herrera, Cristina Gamundi Garcia, and Samantha Martinez as our Fellows. José came to us as a rising third-year student at the University of Kentucky’s J. David Rosenberg College of Law. Born in Veracruz, Mexico, José had worked at Ahmad’s Law Office in Lexington, primarily doing deportation defense and supporting asylum claims. Cristina joined the fellowship as a second-year law student at the University of Washington School of Law. She had been a research intern for the University of Washington Center for Human Rights, where she fought for accountability and transparency from state police departments and federal immigration agencies in several deportation cases. Finally, Samantha came to us as a second-year student at St. Mary’s University School of Law. During her undergraduate studies, Samantha worked with the McAllen Independent School District as a professional tutor for migrant students.

Our sincerest thanks to the life and legacy of Elizabeth Frankel, the Frankel Family, the Fellowship Advisory Committee and our dedicated 2023 cohort of Elizabeth Frankel Fellows.

Being a Frankel fellow taught me that asking questions is better than getting answers sometimes. I was also really impacted by the work that Elizabeth Frankel did here at the Young Center and how much positive change she was able to create. - **Samantha Martinez**

My dream for immigrant children is that they are seen and treated as who they are, which is children—nothing more, nothing less. I continue to work in immigration law because I have hope that one day immigrant children won’t have to be separated from their families. - **Cristina Gamundi Garcia**

My dream [for immigrant children] is for them to have a beautiful childhood. I dream that they are in a place where they feel loved and cared for. I dream that they have a childhood full of passionate exploration and they don’t get labeled and boxed in by a system of incompetence. - **José Herrera**



Communication Work

Our Communication Team’s journey throughout the year was marked by significant achievements, proactive advocacy, and powerful storytelling, all in the service of protecting and promoting the rights and best interests of immigrant children.

Media Advocacy and Policy Influence

At the onset of 2023, our team embarked on a mission to shape media narratives around immigration policies and their impact on children. Collaborating with Young Center policy experts, we successfully published stories in renowned outlets such as the [Huffington Post](#), The Intercept, [MSNBC](#), and [Univision](#). These stories focused on advocating for the safety and asylum rights of children, challenging federal policies that restricted their asylum-seeking capabilities.

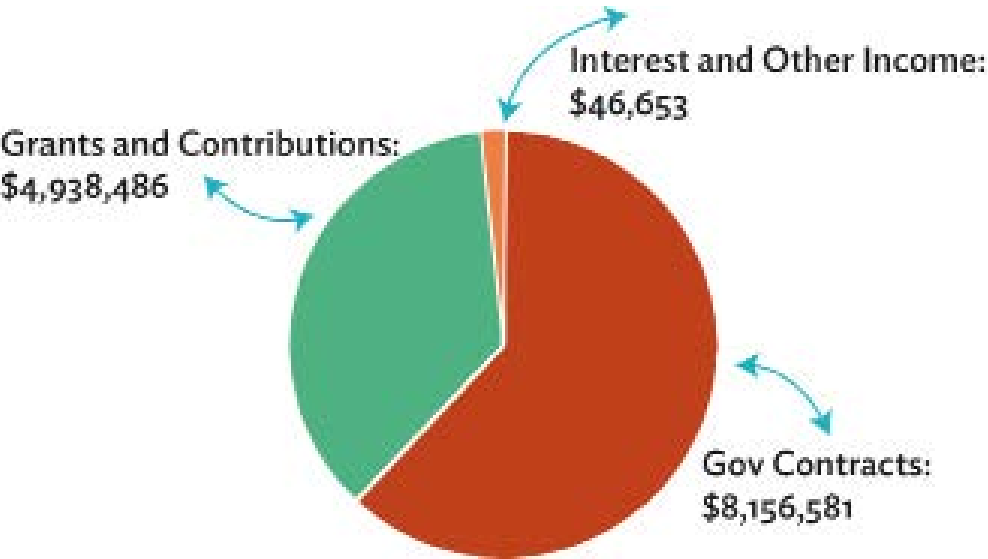
Digital Engagement and Social Media Impact

Digital platforms played a crucial role in our communications strategy. Our social media channels and digital platforms were instrumental in sharing the narratives of unaccompanied immigrant children and their families. With creative infographics and videos, we reached an audience of 78,760 people and grew our follower base to 25,635. These platforms were not just about storytelling; they were pivotal in advocacy campaigns, helping mobilize 1,500 people to take action against anti-immigrant bills and policies. These platforms informed and connected our *community* on a deeper level with the issues.

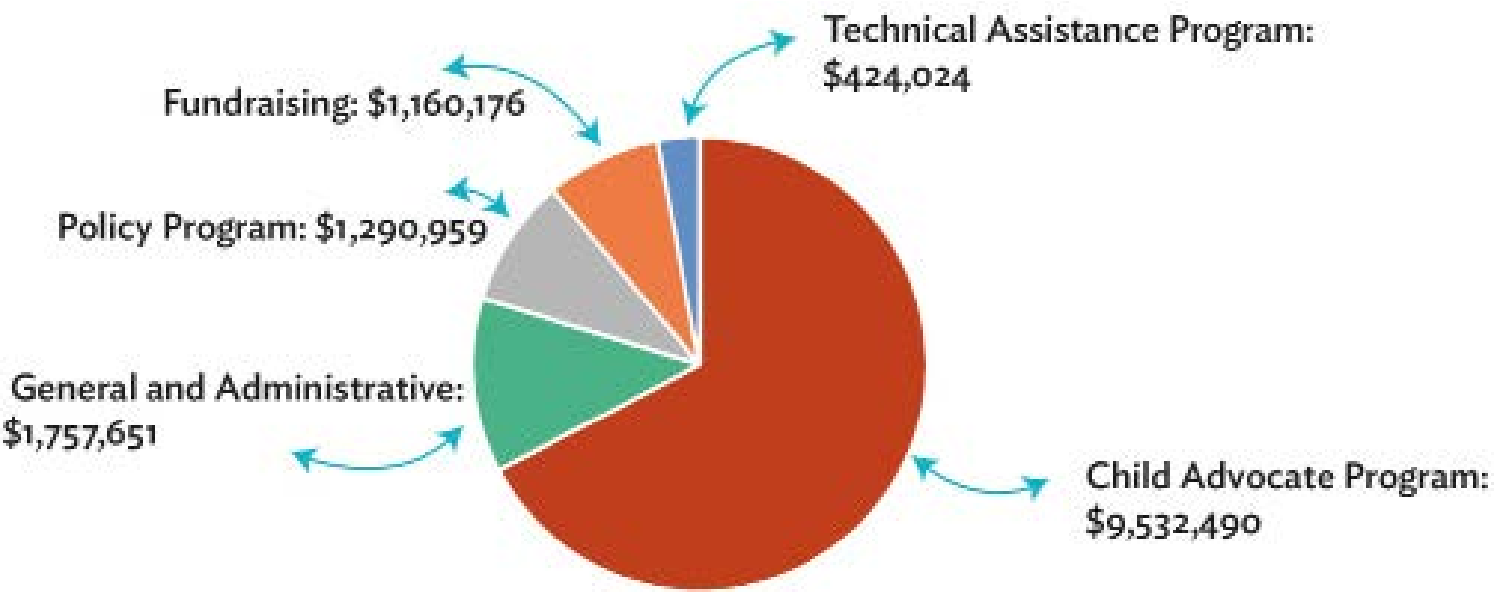


Financials

Operating Revenue:



Operating Expenses:



Young Center Team - Board of Directors

Our Board of Directors is focused on improving equity. The current board is increasingly diverse: 59% of Young Center board members are women and 47% are people of color. We have reserved two positions for members who are not expected to meet the get/give requirement. Several board members are immigrants, including one member who came to the U.S. as an unaccompanied child from Honduras.

- Frances de Pontes Peebles (Chair)
- Julian Dibbell (Vice Chair)
- Adrian Kellams (Treasurer)
- Dr. Selma de Leon-Yznaga (Secretary)
- Kevin Angeles
- Jane Bryne
- Jimena Catarivas Corbett**
- Mariana Espinosa
- Jonathan Frankel
- Chirlie Y. Felix*
- Elvis Garcia Callejas**
- Ygnacio Garza*
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- Beata Leja**
- Fabia Mirick Yazaki
- Wendy Montoya Cloonan**
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- Lori Wittman**

*New Board Members
**Recently rolled off the Board

Young Center-Houston Advisory Board

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- Dr. Dawn McCarty
- Dr. Jane Montealegre
- Mary Newsome, PhD
- Amanda Weeks
- Yasmin Yavar
- Young Zheng Sullivan
- Kristin Zipple-Shedd



Young Center Staff

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SAN ANTONIO

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Maria Barbosa Groszek, Tami Benchoam Rogers, Jackie Diaz, Mina Dixon Davis, Mari Dorn-Lopez, Pamela Duran, Sondra Furcajg, Mary Hanna, Rob Jackson, Anne Kelsey, Alex McAnarney, Mary Miller Flowers, Alejandra Miss Ozuna, Jennifer Nagda, Dorothy Neher, Elizabeth Witmer

Waymakers

Our sincerest thanks to our community of donors who come together for immigrant children. We're particularly grateful to our donors who sustain our work with recurring donations. We also want to recognize everyone who gives on social media or other platforms, making a difference in the lives of immigrant children seeking safety. While we cannot name all of you here, we are deeply appreciative of your support, no matter the amount. Please note, this year, in alignment with our organizational values and our shift to more community centric fundraising practices, we are listing our amazing donors below in alphabetical order instead of grouped by amount as we have done in the past. Thank you for your support!

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“I choose to support unaccompanied immigrant children as an act of rebellion against a world that insists on creating divisions and promoting fear towards those who look, speak, pray, or think differently from us.”

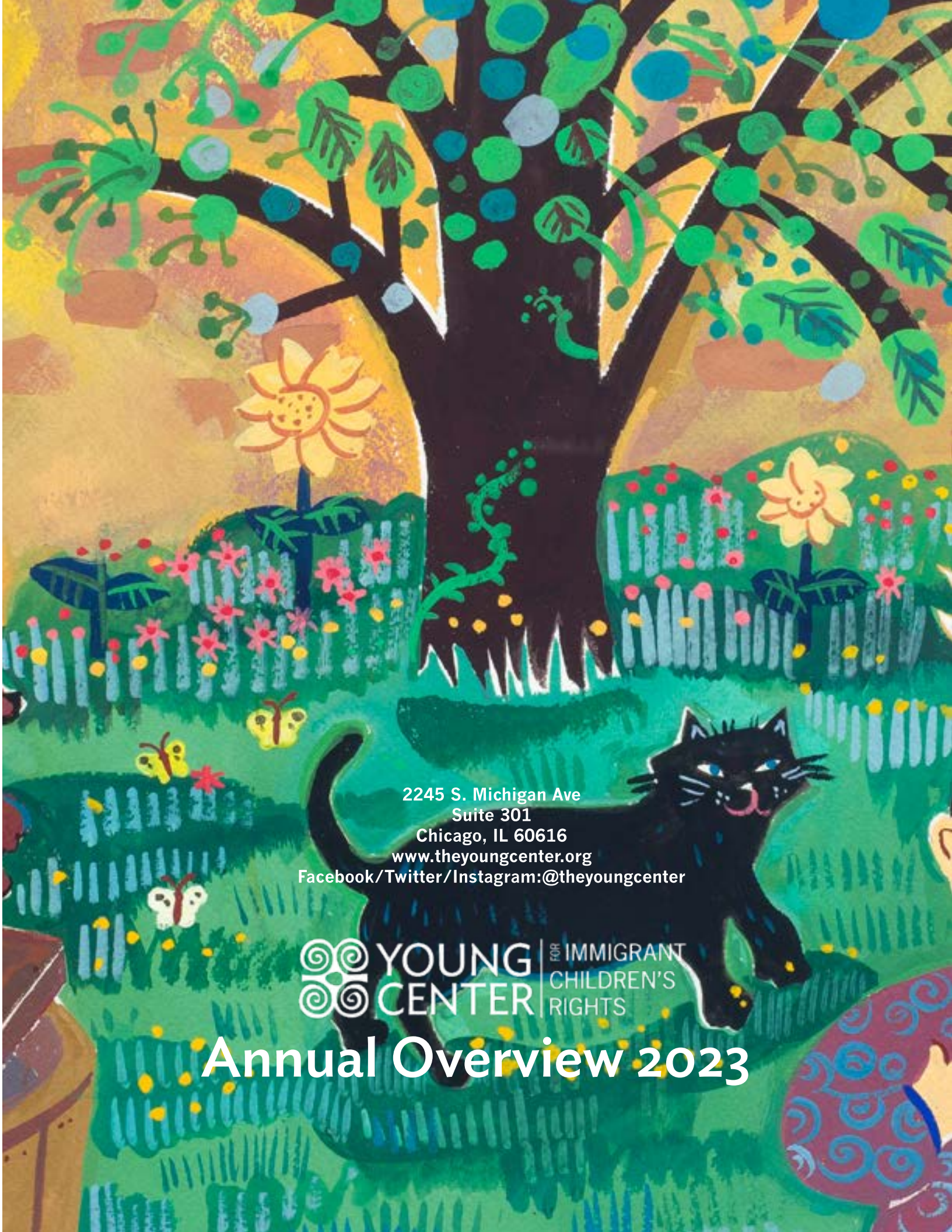
- Magali Montes, Volunteer Child Advocate

Credits

Cover: “Always Come Home to Me” by Belle Yang. Artist-author Belle Yang makes her home in Carmel, California with her mother Laning. Her father Joseph, who walked out of war-torn China as a young man and is the hero of much of her work, died in 2019. Her website is belleyang.com, and her art is represented by Hauk Fine Arts in Pacific Grove, California (haukfinearts.com). Amy Tan writes that Belle Yang has “created a world we can lose ourselves in.” Maxine Hong Kingston calls her “our Isaac Bashevis Singer and Marc Chagall.” Gifted as an artist and writer, she has written and illustrated two highly praised literary works, “Baba: A Return to China Upon My Father’s Shoulders” and “The Odyssey of a Manchurian.” She followed with the powerful graphic novel “Forget Sorrow.” She is also the author-artist of a dozen children’s books, including an autobiographical immigrant story told from a child’s point of view, “My Name is Hannah.”

The Young Center is eternally grateful to Belle Yang for her generous contribution of her artwork each year to support the creation of our Annual Reports.





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Annual Overview 2023