

# 2024 Annual Overview

Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights





Progress in a deeply broken and politicized immigration system is rarely linear. Yet every **step** forward, every **victory**, reflects the strength of our community and collective will.

– Gladis Molina Alt

## A Letter from our Executive Director

In April 2024, I traveled to Washington, D.C. to support the Policy team's advocacy with legislators on Capitol Hill in hopes of securing stronger protections for the immigrant children we serve—children who have courageously crossed borders alone, face complex courtroom proceedings without a guaranteed attorney, and too often go unheard in an immigration system that disempowers them.

After my time in DC, the unspoken yet clear message that stayed with me was immigrant rights are soon going to be too hard to fight for. With eyes already turned to the election, we sensed a growing reluctance from legislators to support immigrant children. It became unmistakably clear: people were turning away, and we were going to have to fight harder than ever. Despite those warning signs, the Young Center pushed forward in our advocacy on all fronts—on the Hill, within systems, and in individual cases.

In 2024, we made enormous strides. We celebrated the opening of our tenth Child Advocate Program site in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a milestone made possible by our collective strategic advocacy. We joined a coalition of immigrant rights organizations to raise \$3 million to ensure that approximately 500 separated families received full legal representation at no cost. We welcomed our third cohort of fellows who participated in the Elizabeth Frankel Fellowship Program, empowering the next generation of advocates to carry forward our mission with courage and commitment. Most critically, we engaged in comprehensive contingency planning to ensure we remain strong, strategic, and ready to protect unaccompanied immigrant children, no matter what lies ahead.

All this progress happened alongside the vital work of our Child Advocate Program, through which we served a record-breaking 1,975 unaccompanied children from 53 countries, supported by nearly 5,500 volunteer hours. What follows in these pages is a deeper look at the impact we made together—powered by your partnership, your generosity, and your belief in a more just future for immigrant children.

In 2024, we saw a major breakthrough: the Department of Justice issued guidance recognizing that immigration judges must consider the expert, child-centered recommendations of our Child Advocates. It was a long-overdue validation of more than a decade of advocacy—and of children's right to have their best interests considered. Though the guidance was rescinded under the transition of the current administration, it underscored both what's possible when we persist, and what's at stake when political winds shift.

Now, we are facing a painful but familiar reality – fighting to preserve many of the hard-won gains we achieved in 2024. Progress in a deeply broken and politicized immigration system is rarely linear. Yet every step forward, every victory, reflects the strength of our community and collective will. The setbacks we now face only deepen our resolve. We remain more determined than ever to fight for a system that centers the rights and best interests of immigrant children.

Together, we can and must build a future where every child is safe, supported, and free. We are deeply grateful for your support, today and in the years to come, and are so honored to have you by our side.

With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Gema', written in a cursive, flowing style.

# 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.



[Learn more here](#)

# Our Values



Child-centered



Courage



Accompaniment



Community



Equality & Justice

# Our Work

## DIRECT SERVICES

We provide independent Child Advocates to unaccompanied and separated immigrant children by submitting best interests determinations to government officials and by providing safe repatriation support to children returning to their home country.

Volunteer Child Advocates

Child Advocate Program

Safe Repatriation

## NARRATIVE CHANGE

In all of our work—from Child Advocates' best interests determinations to our policy briefs—we seek to create opportunities for children to share their experiences through creative storytelling opportunities supported by our staff and communications experts.

## STAKEHOLDER SUPPORT

From supporting attorneys and caseworkers to government officials, we provide technical assistance to stakeholders working with children in immigrant families who are involved in state child welfare systems.

Technical Assistance Program

Legal Advocacy

Trainings

## SYSTEMS CHANGE

We fight for a new system, one built around the needs and capacities of children. Our Policy Team fights for the rights and best interests of immigrant children and youth by influencing key decision-makers to drive local and national policy change

## LITIGATION

We pursue strategic legal action to protect the rights of immigrant children, challenge harmful policies, and ensure fair treatment under the law.

# Meet Elvia: A Story of Strength, Support, and the Right to Stay



**Trigger warning:** This story contains references to trauma and assault.

At just 17 years old, Elvia fled Central America to reunite with her mother thousands of miles away in the United States. A survivor of sexual assault, she had learned that the traumatic incident would change her life forever – she was soon to become a mom herself. Determined to build a better life for herself and her child, she embarked on the long journey north.

After arriving in the U.S., Elvia was designated as an unaccompanied child and placed in federal custody before being quickly released to her mother.

**Yet stability remained just out of reach. To stay in the U.S., she had to navigate a maze of immigration laws—confusing and full of barriers that often leave children feeling powerless.**

In need of help, Elvia turned to someone who promised to guide her through the process. For months, she believed she was on the right path. Then came the crushing discovery: the person she trusted wasn't an attorney at all. It was only after a Young Center Child Advocate joined her case that the truth came to light. Her application for asylum had been improperly filed, putting her and her baby at risk of being deported back to danger.

Elvia was utterly devastated. The future she had fought for—one of safety and healing—suddenly felt like it was slipping away.

**But with the Young Center by her side, Elvia finally had the trusted support she needed.**

Her Child Advocate acted quickly, creating a best interests determination grounded in child welfare research and international law, ensuring Elvia's voice and rights were at the center of her case. Her Advocate also connected her with a trusted immigration attorney, beginning the work of undoing the damage caused by the legal malpractice.

Today, Elvia is 18.

**With her baby in her arms and a new team of committed allies beside her, she is no longer alone.**

She is focused on healing and creating the life she dreamed of—one filled with love, stability, and possibility. Your support makes stories like Elvia's possible. Because of you, she has a chance to build a new life—and to thrive.

## VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT



### Q&A: What does volunteering mean to you?

*with Child Advocate Volunteer Jorge Sandoval from Houston, Texas*

**Q: How has your involvement with the Young Center impacted you?**

**A:** I have volunteered with the Young Center for 6 years and it has been transformative. I discovered my passion for teaching and I've had the opportunity to provide guidance, encouragement, and support to youth who were once in the same situation I was in as an unaccompanied minor who arrived in the U.S. at 14 years old.

**Q: What does advocating for the best interests of children mean to you?**

**A:** To me, it means believing that every child deserves a safe and normal childhood, regardless of their immigration status. Every child has the right to experience childhood to the fullest. Unaccompanied immigrant children deserve the chance to live and build their best life here.

**Q: What message would you share with someone thinking about volunteering or supporting this work?**

**A:** If anyone is considering becoming a volunteer to support unaccompanied immigrant children, I would say: DO IT. Be a supportive, compassionate face they can count on during such an uncertain time; an ally that will stand by their side every step of the way.



**Click for full Q&A!**



Volunteering and supporting this work can **forever change your life**, as it did mine.



## BEHIND THE SCENES



# How Quickly Can You Call A Loved One?

## *Inside the Fight to Reconnect Families Separated by Immigration Policy*

We all know the feeling — how calming it is to hear the voice of a loved one after a long time apart. We know how even a short phone call can ease our hearts, slow our racing thoughts, and remind us that we're not alone. For most of us, that voice is just a few taps away.

But for many immigrant families separated and detained across the United States, hearing each other's voices requires far more: fighting through innumerable layers of red tape, dozens of calls made by Young Center advocates, and many calls gone unanswered by government agencies.

Throughout 2024, Young Center teams across the country spent countless hours fighting through bureaucratic hurdles to preserve one of the most foundational relationships there is: the bond between parent and child. As Child Advocates, the Young Center stepped in to walk alongside children impacted by the Trump administration's 2018 family separation policies—cases now known as “Ms. L” cases following the *Ms. L v. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)* settlement. When appointed to these cases, Child Advocates usually had little more than a child's name and location. From there, they began the long process of piecing together each child's unique story of separation, centering the child's best interest every step of the way.

“This work can be very emotionally taxing,” reflected Staff Attorney Fatima Fareed, noting, “children are left hanging in the balance of a system that does not always have their best interests at heart.”



It feels like you're an investigator... Advocating for these children's cases is definitely not a linear path.

– Lorena Zabetakis, National Staff Attorney

Facing a broken system, advocates faced days full of phone calls and hours of coordination between shelters, foster homes, attorneys, ICE field offices, consulates, and more — just to gather information, get case updates, or ask that children be allowed to speak to their parents. In these cases, small wins began to carry big emotional weight—simple things we might take for granted, like helping a parent send a birthday gift to their daughter or read a handwritten letter to their sons.

The Young Center has advocated relentlessly for these children's cases because it is clear that when these moments of connection don't happen, the consequences on family bonds are painful: children forgetting how to speak their parents' native language; parents left in the dark about their child's case; or a young child being unable to see their mother's face for months.



A lot of this work is bearing witness to the parents' experience of grief and reassuring them I am here to listen, to advocate, and to be in it together with them.

– Elizabeth Garcia, Senior Social Worker

This is where advocacy has been vital, bridging the distance between children, their parents, and the systems that separate them. One painstaking step at a time, our teams have worked to restore connection, build trust, and move families closer to reunification.

And the fight continues. It's the hard-one milestones that keep us going, until every last family is reunited and once again just a quick tap or call away from a loving voice.



I wish that we weren't in these circumstances, but I do cherish the trusting relationship we have with parents as we care for their children, keep their best interests in mind, and fight for them to be together.

– Dulce Segura, Staff Attorney Child Advocate



# 2024

## Young Center Highlights

In a year of shifting policies and rising challenges, we stayed rooted in our mission, showing up for immigrant children and their families day in and day out.

### Young Center Leads \$3 Million Fundraiser to

provide 500+ separated families with access to full legal representation, at no cost.

“Separated families deserve a fair shot at justice... We’re doing everything in our power to meet this critical need.”

– Kelly Albinak Kribs, Co-Director, Technical Assistance Program

### Policy Advocacy Leads to Grand Rapids Site Opening marking the opening of our 10<sup>th</sup> site nationwide!

“This expansion reflects the Young Center’s commitment to serve more children than ever before.”

– Olivia Pena and Marisa Chumil, Co-Directors, Child Advocate Program



Left to right: Alma Acevedo, Jenn Vanegas, Ellen Salgado, Lili Valderrama, and Katie White

### Young Center Releases Report & Webinar on Ending Child Exploitation

Authored by Dr. Ivon Padilla-Rodriguez, the Young Center highlights systemic failures that lead to migrant child labor and hosts a webinar to shift the narrative toward child-centered solutions.

WATCH NOW

January

February

March

April

May

June

### Immigration Courts Critically Reimagine Children’s Proceedings

The Department of Justice releases guidance reflecting over a decade of our advocacy to fundamentally change the courtrooms in which children carry the burden to prove that they are eligible for protection.

“All immigration judges now have a duty to consider the expertise of our Child Advocates.”

– Jennifer Nagda, Chief Policy Officer



### Executive Director Inspires at University of Illinois, Chicago, delivering a lecture on policy changes that can

meet newcomers with generosity, trust, and support.

“The choice to trust and be generous is always ours.”

– Gladis Molina Alt, Executive Director

### Young Center Policy Team Works to Advance the Children’s Safe Welcome Act,

a bill that centers children’s rights in immigration policy—from promoting family unity to holistic support for children in detention.



## First Border Educational Experience Led by Executive Director

"I will forever treasure my border educational experience as a lesson on the importance of contradictions. So often associated with death, the border is a wellspring of life. From our staff at our Harlingen office to the folks at the Sidewalk School, the Rio Grande Valley holds countless examples of kindness despite the border's militarization. While there is grief, joy is never far behind."

— Meghan Jorgensen, Chief Development & External Affairs Officer



Presenters left to right: Jenn Vanegas and Katie White - Grand Rapids Office

## Fall Child Advocate Trainings Conclude with 19 Total Sessions in 2024

Participants reflected a wide range of ages, races, religions, immigration backgrounds, and community roles. After completing federal and state background checks, volunteers were matched to cases, ready to walk alongside immigrant children.



Learn about volunteering!

## Young Center prepares for 2025

With changes to the federal administration on the horizon, we review our 5-year strategic plan and focus on strengthening our programs, advocacy, and infrastructure to ensure we're ready to defend immigrant children's rights, no matter what lies ahead.

July

August

September

October

November

December

## Victory for Baby Doe in Afghan Adoption Case

Following an amicus brief filed by the Young Center, the organization welcomes a Virginia court's decision to void the unlawful adoption of an Afghan child taken from her family by a U.S. Marine in 2021 in support of family reunification based on the child's best interests.

**Staff Convenes in El Paso, TX & 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Waymakers Race** Over 300 participants across 28 states and three countries logged 13,358 miles—raising \$39,285 to support immigrant children and honor the legacy of Elizabeth Frankel.



## Preparing for the Road Ahead for Immigrant Families, Children, and Youth

The Young Center hosted a post-election webinar to examine how the outcome would affect immigrant children—and how we'll continue advocating to keep them safe, free, and in community.

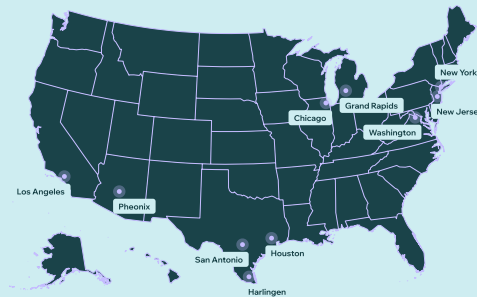
WATCH NOW

Also featured: Executive Director Gladis Molina appears on Arizona's Family CBS 5 calling for continued resistance to harmful immigration policies.



Here's what  
your  
support  
made  
possible for  
immigrant  
children in  
2024.

1,975  
children served by the  
Child Advocate Program



across  
10  
Young  
Center sites



1,388 new cases  
in 2024  
587 cases continued  
from 2023

749 Best Interest  
Determinations  
submitted

92% acceptance rate  
by Immigration  
Judges

Services provided to  
children across

22  
states



53  
countries of origin

Top 5 countries of origin:

- Guatemala: 24%
- Venezuela: 7%
- Honduras: 19%
- Guinea: 6%
- Mexico: 19%



402 children under 12 years old

589 children 17 years old and above,  
on verge of system age-out

5,500 hours donated by  
Child Advocate  
Volunteers

325  
new volunteers  
trained

\$191,345  
saved through  
donated hours

37  
languages  
spoken



# 212

## engagements by the Technical Assistance Program



The [Technical Assistance Program](#) provides stakeholder engagements—such as consultations, resource sharing, and trainings—to professionals supporting immigrant youth impacted by, or at risk of being impacted by, child welfare and other state court systems.

### 143 new engagements in 2024

#### states served

**26** AL, AZ, CA, CO, FL, GA, IL, IN, LA, MI, MN, MO, MS, NC, NE, NJ, NM, NY, OK, OR, PA, SC, TN, TX, VA, WA

**1** international engagement with Guatemala

**6** Presentations & trainings for state court systems



### 20 key policies influenced to protect children's best interests

### 27 presentations & trainings for key stakeholders

The [Policy Team](#) engages in advocacy at the federal, state, and local levels, advancing child-centered proposals and working to slow or stop harmful policies that impact immigrant children's rights.

**18**  
publications  
advancing our  
mission

**7**  
state and local policy  
initiatives influenced to  
safeguard immigrant  
children



To view all Young Center policy updates & publications, click [here!](#)



**Carola  
Aisenberg**



**Aaron  
Rodriguez**



**Fatima  
Salinas**

### 3 Elizabeth Frankel Fellows joined the Young Center

With support from the Elizabeth Frankel Fund, Aaron, Carola, and Fatima trained within the Child Advocate Program as part of the

fellowship's third cohort. The fellowship supports law students in becoming powerful advocates for immigrant children, serving as Child Advocates for unaccompanied immigrant children and conducting legal research. The fellowship carries forward Elizabeth Frankel's vision of honoring each child's wishes through thoughtful, strategic advocacy.

# Board of Directors

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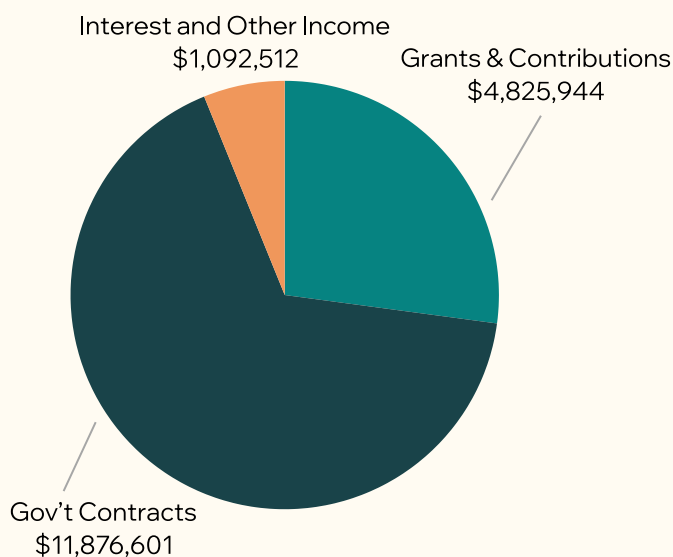
Fabia Mirick Yazaki

\*New board members

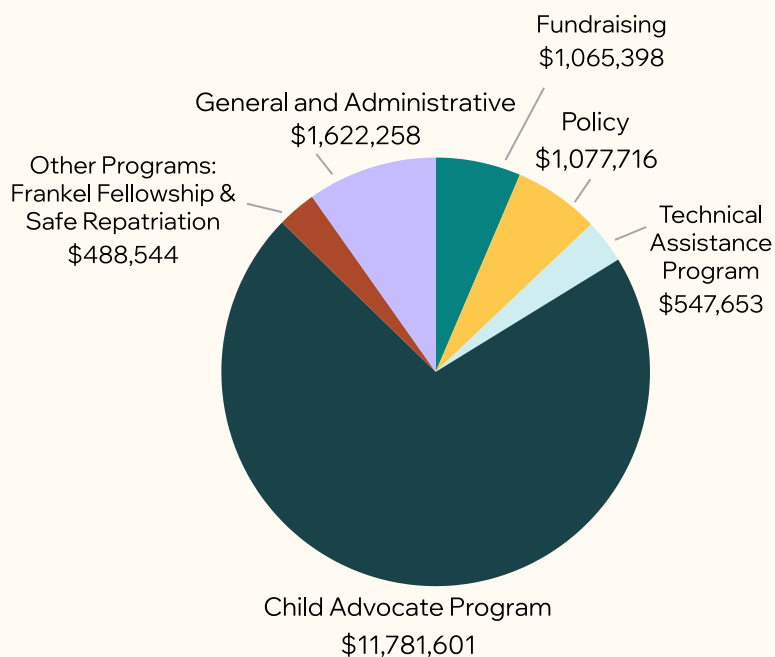
\*\*Recently rolled off the Board

## Financials

### Operating Revenue



### Operating Expenses





# Thank You to Our Community

We are tremendously grateful for the generous community of supporters and Waymakers who make our work possible. Your commitment and belief in a more just world for immigrant children sustains us every step of the way. Through the collective impact of our community, we'll continue creating lasting change for children and families to build a future where every child is safe, heard, and free.

This year, in alignment with community-centric fundraising principles and to foster a more equitable approach to donor recognition, we've chosen not to list individual donor names in this report. If you have any questions or would like to learn more, please email [donations@theyoungcenter.org](mailto:donations@theyoungcenter.org).

## Credits



**Front and back cover artwork:** Illustrations from *Tíos and Primos* by Jacqueline Alcántara


**Jacqueline Alcántara** ([JacquelineAlcantara.com](http://JacquelineAlcantara.com)) is the award-winning illustrator of many picture books, including *Jam, Too?* by JaNay Brown-Wood, *The Field* by Baptiste Paul, *Freedom Soup* by Tami Charles, *Jump at the Sun* by Alicia D. Williams, and Kirkus Prize finalist *Your Mama* by NoNieqa

Ramos. Her books have been named Best Books of the Year by *Kirkus Reviews*, *School Library Journal*, *Shelf Awareness*, and *The Horn Book*. *Tíos and Primos* is Jacqueline's author-artist debut and was inspired by her visits to Honduras with her father. She draws and teaches illustration in Chicago, Illinois.


***The Young Center is immensely grateful to Jacqueline Alcántara for generously contributing her artwork to this year's Annual Report.***





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