



2025 Annual Overview

Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights



A Letter from our Executive Director

This past year tested us and the people we serve in ways few of us could have imagined. Across the country, immigrant children, their families, and extended communities faced an unrelenting escalation of fear, separation, and uncertainty.

Family separation re-emerged in new and devastating forms, as a cruel strategy designed to destabilize our communities, instill fear in families, and leave children without the protection every child deserves. From Los Angeles to Chicago, Minneapolis, Phoenix, and beyond, immigrant families faced violent enforcement actions in the very places where they should feel the safest: their neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and homes.

In 2025, the Young Center returned to its founding truth: we are advocates for children first and foremost. When systems fail, shift, or abandon children, our role is clear: to stand with them, to bring what is happening into the light, and to say yes to what children need.

“Over the course of 2025, we showed up wherever children needed us. **Again and again, our teams asked: What does this child need from us in this very moment?**”

We challenged unlawful efforts to deport children without due process. We stood beside detained caregivers and parents fighting to reunify with their children. We accompanied children as their average length of detention rose from 30 to 198 days – more than sixfold, and longer than a typical U.S. school year. We brought children’s stories and voices into our courtrooms, policy conversations, advocacy coalitions, and public conversations.

This year, we gave our all to stand alongside children. And we did not stand alone.

To every volunteer, colleague, donor, partner, community member and supporter who chose to stand in solidarity with immigrant children during this painful year: your courage truly fueled ours. Your support reminded us that you see, value, and share our commitment to this work.

The threats facing immigrant children remain real. But so does our resolve. We will continue to bear witness, speak truth to power, and stand with every child with care, courage, and the unwavering belief in their right to be heard, to be safe, and to be free from detention and with family in community.

With determination and gratitude,

Gladis Molina Alt

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.

How We Do It



We advocate for children’s wishes and best interests.



We fight for children’s right to be with family.



We keep children safe in and ultimately free from government custody.



We ensure kids can access fair proceedings and permanency.



We amplify and uplift children’s voices.



We support safe communities.

Our Impact: Stakeholder Support



Reuniting a Father and His Children in Time for Christmas: Isaías' Story

In the spring of 2024, Evelyn* and Oscar* were placed in the U.S. foster care system after living with their mother. Their father, Isaías*, traveled from El Salvador in hopes of reunifying with his children, but was immediately detained at the US-Mexico border. From ICE detention, Isaías had little contact with his children or their child welfare case manager and did not know how to ask for an attorney to represent him in Evelyn and Oscar's foster care case.

It was from immigration detention that Isaías first connected with our Technical Assistance Program (TAP).

Our TAP colleagues quickly advocated for him to be appointed an attorney in his children's foster care case and worked to ensure he could remain involved in decisions affecting Evelyn and Oscar.

After his deportation to El Salvador, our TAP colleagues continued to stand beside Isaías, from advocating for his children's placement in a Spanish-speaking home, to navigating the complex logistics needed to secure their passports.

Even as Isaías' children were moved between three foster homes – only one of which spoke their first language – our TAP colleagues coordinated with Isaías, his attorney, and the child welfare case manager to push for family reunification in El Salvador.

In the summer of 2025, a court ordered agencies to complete Isaías' reunification with his children, yet months continued to pass.

Even when all government officials agreed it was best for these children to reunite with their father, it felt as if no one understood that every additional day these children spent in foster care was a day they didn't get to spend with their family.

However, Isaías remained grounded in his faith that he would be reunited with his children.

Finally, after endless calls and outreach to partners, our TAP colleagues gave Isaías the good news just days before Christmas: that he'd be able to celebrate the holidays alongside his two precious children.

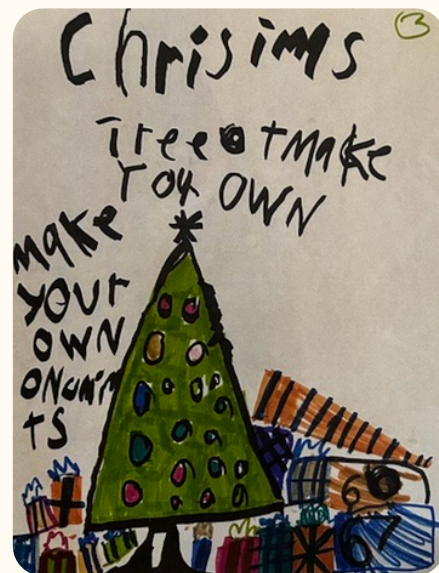
Through it all, Isaías remained his children's fiercest advocate. Alongside him, our TAP colleagues fought to reunify Evelyn and Oscar with their father as quickly as possible so the family could spend the holidays together again. Reflecting on his family's experience, Isaías hopes other parents going through similar separations hold onto hope, even during the most difficult moments.

**Names and identifying details changed to preserve family privacy.*

Our Technical Assistance Program (TAP)

TAP seeks to bridge the gaps in information and resources that arise when immigrant children and families are impacted by both the U.S. immigration system and state child welfare systems.

By offering case consultations, trainings, and connection to resources to agency officials, caseworkers, attorneys, guardians ad litem, and courts, we aim to build the capacity of child welfare stakeholders to navigate the inevitable complexities that arise when immigrant families are child welfare system-involved and, ultimately, to improve outcomes for children in these families.



Artwork generously donated by Aadi, 6-year-old Young Center supporter, and family.

Midnight Deportations: Defending Due Process

Over Labor Day weekend 2025, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents headed to government shelters to involuntarily and unlawfully deport more than 600 Guatemalan and Indigenous children before many of their immigration cases had been completed, disregarding children's wishes to exercise their legal right to seek protection in the United States and, in some cases, families' concerns about their children's safety.

As reports of the holiday weekend deportation attempts emerged, the Young Center mobilized immediately. Colleagues and volunteers across our Child Advocate, Policy, and Litigation programs worked around the clock, coordinating advocacy in federal courts and detention facilities.

Within hours, the Young Center joined a class action lawsuit as "next friend," seeking emergency court intervention to stop the unlawful removals.

Even after a federal judge issued a temporary restraining order, reports indicated that government officials continued to wake children in the middle of the night, told them to gather their belongings, prepare for immediate deportation, and boarded them on airplanes sitting on tarmacs.

“¿Por qué me quieren regresar? ¿Por qué me quieren hacer daño?”

“Why do they want to send me back? Why do they want to hurt me?”

questioned one very young girl. The children's grief was overwhelming; they cried so intensely that many had swollen eyes.

Gladys Hernandez, Managing Attorney in Harlingen, TX

Throughout the night, our colleagues rushed to facilities with copies of the court order in hand, intervening to ensure government officials complied and stopped removing children from facilities.

At a hearing on Sunday, the court again ordered the government to stop removing Guatemalan children in federal custody and confirmed that children already placed on flights would be returned to government shelters. Since Labor Day weekend, our Child Advocates have continued serving as “next friend,” submitting declarations that ensure children's experiences are heard by the court.

The events of that weekend underscored a fundamental principle: every child deserves safety, a fair hearing, and a unique determination of their best interests before government officials make life-altering decisions. In moments of crisis, we stand ready to defend those protections. Through advocacy, litigation, and direct service, we continue working toward an immigration system that treats immigrant children as children first.

Ensuring Children's Safe Journey Home

As the federal government's unlawful attempt to deport hundreds of children over Labor Day weekend highlighted, **it's critical to understand what safe repatriation is and what it is not.**

Safe repatriation is more than returning a child home.

Focused on facilitating the life-altering process of repatriation, our Safe Repatriation team works alongside Child Advocates and trusted international partners to help ensure that children's journeys are grounded in dignity, preparation, and care.

By carefully learning each child's story, we help children and youth by:

- Facilitating trauma-informed and culturally appropriate safety assessments in home countries
- Partnering with the Child Advocate Program to develop return plans that protect each child's individuality, humanity, and dignity
- Collaborating with international partners to navigate local systems that impact children's experiences upon return
- Coordinating youth's access to resources that support well-being and long-term stability
- Advancing safer, more child-centered repatriation practices

safe repatriation

noun \ 'sāf ,rē-pā-trē-'ā-shən \

The voluntary and dignified return of a person to their country of origin, in a way that ensures their physical safety, dignity, and access to basic services and resources upon return.

Advocacy, Empathy, and Courage in Action: Celebrating Our Volunteers

Every child deserves someone who will listen, stand beside them, and make sure their voice is heard.

Our Volunteer Child Advocates come from all walks of life, but they share a common commitment: accompanying immigrant children through some of the most challenging moments of their lives with compassion, dignity, and care.

I want to become involved with unaccompanied immigrants and not just be on the sidelines reading about them in the news. I want to learn these peoples' stories and connect with them. It inspires me, and I hope that my regular contact gives them some sense of certainty and security in a very uncertain time of their lives.

- Los Angeles, CA Volunteer

I love children and want to do what I can to make their immigration experience as positive as possible. I want to be someone in their life that is on their side. Being an advocate reminds me daily of the privilege and blessings I have.

- Harlingen, TX Volunteer

I believe that all children, regardless of immigration status, deserve supportive, kind environments where they can grow and thrive.

- Washington, DC Volunteer

My ancestors immigrated to the U.S., and I know they benefited from people who were willing to help them find their way. I'd like to pay forward this spirit of kindness to those who need it in 2025 and beyond.

- Washington, DC Volunteer

How A Trusted Adult Can Make A Difference in the Life of An Unaccompanied Immigrant Child

By Catherine Kutney, Young Center Volunteer Child Advocate

My name is Katie Kutney and I am a high school English as a Second Language teacher. I have been working with immigrant students in schools for the past 13 years. I recently began volunteering with the Young Center as a Volunteer Child Advocate.

I felt the need to do more to support our immigrant community with this new administration and the forthcoming changes to our immigration system.

Once I submitted my paperwork, and got my clearances, I waited for a case. I assumed I would be placed with an older child since I thought most unaccompanied minors were older kids.

I was surprised to find that my first child would be a seven-year-old! My time working with him has been very rewarding. His trauma is deep, and despite that, he is always in a good mood and loves being silly. We play a lot of Uno and board games. We draw and color and play with action figures. We listen to music and talk about his likes and interests.

Sometimes I feel like we are just playing, and that it isn't so important, but then when we have to skip a session, he gets sad. **Recently he told me that when he gets to his family, he's going to buy a cat and name it Katy like me.**

This new administration beats down immigrants daily. The prevailing message is that they are wrong, bad, and shouldn't be here. **Being a volunteer child advocate puts us in a position to help heal the wounds of this narrative.**

We can help immigrant children feel worthy and important in this world, despite what they see about themselves in the news and society. **If you are considering becoming a volunteer child advocate, now is the time. Immigrant children need us now, more than ever.**

Read Catherine's full blog on www.youngcenter.org

At the Young Center, our Volunteer Child Advocates aren't just part of the work — they're the heart of it. ♥

Cecilia's Fight for Family Unity

For years, Cecilia has refused to give up on her grandson.

When her young grandson entered Florida's child welfare system in 2022, Cecilia quickly stepped forward to care for him. Having been part of her grandson's life since birth, Cecilia hoped to provide him with the stability and family connection every child deserves.

"Mi deseo es que mi nieto sea devuelto adonde pertenece. Yo, y el resto de nuestra familia, le queremos mucho y lo extrañamos mucho."

"My wish is for my grandson to return where he belongs. His family and I love and miss him very much."

Instead, she found herself navigating the intersection of the state child welfare system and federal immigration system, where obstacles repeatedly stood in the way of keeping her family together.

When she realized she was consistently being overlooked as a caregiver and had not been informed of her rights as a grandmother, Cecilia reached out to the Young Center for help. Our Technical Assistance Program and Litigation Program quickly joined her fight, helping her navigate a complex legal system while she remained steadfast in her commitment to her grandson.

She relocated, secured stable employment and housing, attended court hearings, and traveled countless miles to maintain contact with him. Through video calls and in-person visits, she worked tirelessly to preserve a bond abruptly severed by the child welfare system years ago.

Yet despite her persistence, Cecilia encountered barriers within the child welfare system that were exacerbated by her experience as an immigrant.

Despite repeatedly expressing her desire to care for her grandson, the Florida government did not give her a meaningful opportunity to be considered before he was placed with non-relative caregivers. Cecilia was forced to fight in court with the Young Center's help simply to maintain contact with him, and throughout the entire process, the state created significant barriers barring Cecilia from participating in decisions about her grandson.

In late 2025, the Florida government denied Cecilia's application to adopt her grandson. Our Litigation Program immediately challenged the decision, standing alongside Cecilia at a critical evidentiary hearing in Florida. Although the court ruled against her, the Young Center appealed. In the meantime, the state finalized her grandson's adoption by the non-relative caregivers without notifying Cecilia.

Today, the Young Center continues fighting alongside Cecilia in court, challenging actions that permanently separated a child from a grandmother who never stopped showing up for him and advocating for systems that prioritize family unity.

From litigating cases and filing amicus briefs, to participating in litigation through declarations or as experts, our Litigation Program ensures that the experiences of immigrant children are considered by courts in decisions that affect them.

Through impact litigation, we fight to advance systemic change and policies that promote the safety, wellbeing, and best interests of immigrant children.

The Protect Immigrant Children Campaign

In 2025, our Policy Program launched the Protect Immigrant Children (PIC) Campaign, the first phase of a national narrative change effort to build broader public support for immigrant children by educating and activating politically moderate audiences.

Working alongside the Center for Law and Social Policy, Children Thrive Action Network, Acacia Center for Justice, the National Center for Youth Law, and the End Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) Backlog Coalition, we advanced a shared child-centered narrative, expanded public engagement, and developed research-backed messaging tools that helped advocates communicate more effectively about immigrant children's experiences and rights.

The campaign combined polling research, message testing, and storytelling by trusted community voices to reach new audiences and strengthen public support for child-centered policies.

Campaign Wins

- ★ Activated dozens of trusted community voices across eight key states
- ★ Generated media coverage, opinion pieces, podcasts, and public events that elevated children's experiences
- ★ Brought child-centered perspectives into state and federal policy discussions
- ★ Strengthened support for family unity and protections for immigrant children
- ★ Built momentum for Phase 2 of the policy and narrative change campaign: **All Children Belong**

Storyteller Spotlight: Dr. Minal Giri

The campaign activated dozens of trusted community voices, including pediatricians, teachers, foster parents, social workers, faith leaders, elected officials, and caregivers, who shared firsthand perspectives through media interviews, opinion pieces, public events, and legislative advocacy.

A pediatrician and co-chair of the Illinois AAP Refugee Immigrant Child Health Initiative, Dr. Minal Giri shared firsthand stories about the impact of immigration enforcement on children's health. After participating in the Young Center's Illinois press call, Dr. Giri testified before a shadow congressional hearing about how immigration enforcement actions disrupt children's medical care, shatters their sense of safety, and interrupts critical treatment.

She also developed the SAFE Care Act (Safeguarding Access to Family and Emergency Care), draft legislation designed to protect critically ill children in Illinois from immigration enforcement that interferes with medical treatment. The Young Center continues to work with Dr. Giri to advance this legislation and to find other opportunities to protect immigrant children.



2025 Young Center Highlights

In a year dominated by escalating attacks on immigrant children, families, and communities, the Young Center met each moment with child-centered advocacy, cross-program collaboration, and an unwavering commitment to children's safety, dignity, and rights.

Our Technical Assistance Program began responding to a sharp increase for assistance requests with expanded consultations and trainings as child welfare professionals and partners navigated executive orders, immigration raids, and family separations.

Our Litigation program filed an **amicus brief** defending children's right to legal representation, and our **Safe Repatriation team** hosted its first international convening with home study providers across Latin America in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala.



Our Safe Repatriation Team, international service providers and staff in a group picture in front of Vida Digna's office

Our Child Advocate Program hosted its largest national volunteer training to date, welcoming over 100 participants over two days. New Volunteer Child Advocates prepared to support unaccompanied and separated immigrant children with trauma-informed, child-centered advocacy.

January

February

March

April

May

June

We began the year in community in New York City, convening funders, partners, and supporters as we prepared to meet the needs of immigrant children in the face of a new administration.

Young Center Child Advocates dramatically increased best interests advocacy for unaccompanied children in immigration court hearings, after the federal government abruptly interfered with funding for children's immigration attorneys. Alongside partner coalitions, we documented and underscored the funding cut's harm to children's safety and right to due process.

The Young Center celebrated two decades of child-centered advocacy alongside supporters, colleagues, and partners at its 20th Anniversary Homecoming Celebration in Chicago, recognizing Help for Children (HFC) as the 2025 Maria Woltjen Child Advocate Waymaker Honoree.



Left to right: Gladis Molina Alt, Young Center Executive Director, and Sumudu Waas, HFC Chief Executive Officer



The Young Center served as “Next Friend” in federal court for Guatemalan children

who were targeted for unlawful deportation over Labor Day weekend, while simultaneously coordinating an organization-wide response to new federal policies granting ICE access to children in shelters. Our colleagues across programs worked with partners to document risks, share guidance, and help ensure children's safety and access to legal protections.



Young Center supporters in New York City. Photo: Mauricio de Riglos (@nolightsnyc)

The Young Center strengthened its cross-program reproductive justice work, expanding support for pregnant and parenting youth through direct advocacy, case consultations, data analysis, and policy advocacy.

We also kicked off a season of fall events in New York City, Boston, and Phoenix, engaging supporters across the country in our work to stand with immigrant children.

Our Policy Program presented at the 2025 TASH Conference on the needs and challenges faced by immigrant children with disabilities, closing out a year of disability rights advocacy across social media, policy, and trainings. That same month, our **Technical Assistance Program** responded to as many requests from detained parents for consultations on the custody of their children as it did in all of 2024. By the end of 2025, they responded to four times as many of these requests as they did in 2024.



Anne Kelsey, Senior Policy Analyst for Disability Rights, on right, with fellow disability advocates

July

August

September

October

November

December

Our Policy Program launched the Protect Immigrant Children Campaign, marking Phase 1 of the narrative change campaign.

The 5th Annual Elizabeth Frankel Waymakers Mileage Challenge became the largest in Young Center history, with over 530 participants across 40 states and three countries logging 28,742 miles, raising \$99,420 to support immigrant children and honor the legacy of Elizabeth Frankel.

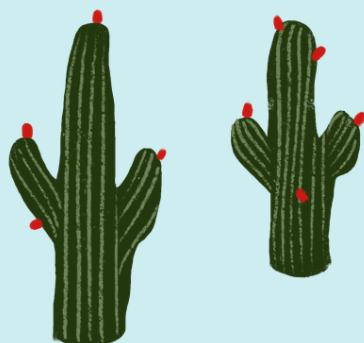


Young Center colleagues and community members on a Waymakers Walk in Chicago



Shaina Simenas, Co-Director for our Technical Assistance Program, on left, with co-panelists

Our Technical Assistance Program curated a panel presentation by youth with lived experience at the intersection of foster care and the U.S. immigration system at a convening of child welfare stakeholders in California coordinated by our partner, Casey Family Programs.

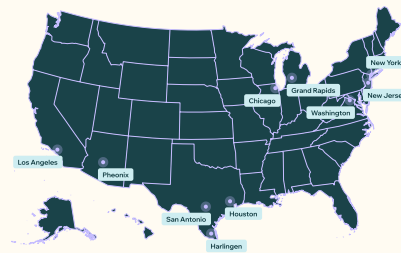


2025 by the Numbers

Data represents the 2025 fiscal year,
Oct. 1, 2024–Sept. 30, 2025



2,111
children served by
the Child Advocate
Program



across
10
Young Center
sites



1,397 new cases in
2025

714 cases
continued from
2024

677 children at risk
of transfer to
adult ICE
detention after
turning 17 years
old

472 children 12
years old and
under

1,062 Best Interest Determinations (BIDs) submitted

88% BID recommendations accepted by decision-makers
in cases where decisions have been made

Services provided to children
across

28
states

63
countries of origin



Top 5 countries of origin:

- Guatemala: 23%
- Mexico: 19%
- Honduras: 19%
- Venezuela: 7%
- Guinea: 6%

6,500

hours donated by

793

active Child
Advocate Volunteers



498 new volunteers
trained

\$226,135 saved through
donated hours

32 languages
spoken

3 Elizabeth Frankel Fellows joined the
Young Center

With support from the Elizabeth Frankel Fund, Alondra, Kasandra, and Rossiel joined the Young Center for 10 weeks in the summer of 2025 as part of the fellowship's fourth annual cohort. Each fellow served as Child Advocates for an unaccompanied immigrant child in ORR custody. The fellows also worked on a project for our Policy program, and traveled to New York and Harlingen. The fellowship carries forward Elizabeth Frankel's vision of honoring each child's wishes and best interests through compassionate, strategic, and zealous advocacy.



Alondra Vazquez
Lopez



Rossiel
Reyes



Kasandra Hernandez
Rodriguez

140

**total engagements
by our Technical
Assistance Program**

Engagements include consultations, resource sharing, and trainings for professionals supporting immigrant youth impacted by, or at risk of being impacted by, child welfare and other state court systems.



39 **detained parents supported through family separation** due to heightened immigration enforcement

14 **presentations and trainings** for stakeholders across the country

30 **states served**, including AL, AZ, CA, CO, DE, FL, GA, IL, IN, KS, KY, LA, MA, MD, ME, MI, MN, MO, NC, NJ, NV, NY, OK, PA, SC, TN, TX, VA, WI

11 **lawsuits engaged**
by our Litigation
Program

10

**Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)
requests submitted**, seeking truth,
accountability, and protection for
vulnerable youth

Our Policy Program advocated for or challenged



73 **federal policy actions**
impacting immigrant
children

17 **state and local policy
actions** impacting
immigrant children

34 **presentations delivered to partners**
across the country about the Young
Center's programs and policy goals

18 **coalition publications**
advancing the Young
Center's mission

29 **partnerships developed beyond the immigrant advocacy field**, including

- ★ Juvenile Justice
- ★ Reproductive Justice
- ★ Disability Rights
- ★ Indigenous Rights
- ★ Child Welfare



Young Center colleagues gathered at our 20th Anniversary Homecoming Celebration in Chicago

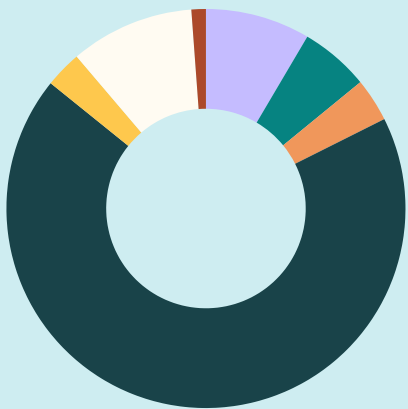
Financials

Operating Revenue



- Government Contracts: \$12,507,415
- Grants & Contributions: \$7,815,264
- Interest & Other Income: \$634,042

Operating Expenses



- Child Advocate Program: \$13,231,081
- General & Administrative: \$1,949,423
- Fundraising: \$1,646,100
- Policy: \$1,086,352
- Technical Assistance Program: \$683,217
- Litigation: \$226,918
- Other Programs: \$578,258
(Frankel Fellowship, Safe Repatriation, & Cross Program Funding)

Board of Directors

- Frances de Pontes Peebles
Chair
- Jane Byrne
Vice Chair
- Fabia Mirick Yazaki
Vice Chair
- Adrian Kellams
Treasurer
- Renata Garcia Vazquez
Secretary
- Renee Ahlers Beckoff*
- Sara J. Chipps*
- Dr. Selma de Leon-Yznaga
- Julian Dibbell**
- Mariana Espinosa
- Enrique Espinoza*
- Chirlie Y. Felix
- Jonathan Frankel
- Ygnacio D. Garza
- Kathy Guinnesssey
- Beata Leja*
- Zach Markin*
- William Reiss
- Alexander Rivera
- Brian Ruben**
- Darrell Silver

* New board members
** Recently rolled off the Board





Young Center board members, colleagues, volunteers, and supporters gathered in New York City to hear from programs about the ongoing work to reunify families, free children from detention, and advance policies that protect children's rights.

Photo: Mauricio de Riglos (@nolightsnyc)

As advocates for children's safety and freedom, the time to act is now.

Donate

Children deserve to be safe, free, and with family in community.

Your support strengthens family reunification efforts, policy advocacy, and the steady presence of Child Advocates standing beside children in detention.

Scan the QR code to give today.



Give with confidence



Stay Up to Date

Get updates on policy, field work, advocacy opportunities, and Young Center events.



Volunteer

Join our community of hundreds of volunteers who advocate for unaccompanied immigrant children.



Reclaim the Narrative

Follow us on socials and elevate our messaging, amplify children's stories, and receive action alerts.

- TheYoungCenter
- @theyoungcenter
- @theyoungcenter
- @theyoungcenter.bsky.social

Organize Your Community



We need your voice to educate your community. Host an event, a fundraiser, or lend your skills.
Scan the QR code to join us.



Thank You to Our Community

To every supporter who showed up this year: thank you. We are tremendously grateful.

In 2025, we received an outpouring of support from 5,758 donors, including 452 monthly donors.

In a year when immigrant children, families, and communities needed us more than ever, your generosity helped us respond with urgency, care, and resilience.

This work will continue to require all of us: to speak up for immigrant children's rights, to support one another, and to help share the responsibility of protecting our communities. Together, we can keep building a future where every child is safe, heard, and free from detention, with family in community.

In alignment with community-centric fundraising principles and to foster a more equitable approach to donor recognition, individual donor names are not listed in this report. If you have any questions or would like to learn more, please email donations@theyoungcenter.org.

Illustrator Credit



Front and back cover artwork: Illustrations from *Clarita Migrates North* by Antonio Alanís

Antonio Alanís (antonioalanisart.com) is a Mexican American illustrator, educator, and cultural worker based in Durham, North Carolina. His work uplifts stories of strength, belonging, and identity within BIPOC communities. Through both visual art and grant-writing consulting, Antonio bridges storytelling, social impact, and creative cultural strategy. *Clarita Migrates North* is his debut children's picture book.

The Young Center is immensely grateful to Antonio Alanís for generously contributing his artwork to this year's Annual Report.



Annual Overview 2025

The Young Center
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www.theyoungcenter.org

