

# Securing Help for Immigrants Through Education and Legal Development (SHIELD) Act

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The *Securing Help for Immigrants through Education and Legal Development (SHIELD) Act* would help ensure that immigrants obtain access to high-quality legal representation during immigration removal proceedings. The legislation helps to address the growing shortage of immigration legal professionals by funding the recruitment, training, and retention of lawyers and other legal services staff.

Removal can inflict devastating harm on individuals, tearing families apart and exposing individuals to life-threatening danger abroad. But immigrants lack the right to government-appointed counsel in immigration proceedings, forcing many to navigate a complex legal system alone. Access to counsel can be life-changing—immigrants with legal representation are less likely to be ordered removed than those without counsel.

Since taking office, the Trump administration has aggressively undermined the integrity of the immigration court system, arbitrarily firing over 100 immigration judges (IJs), lowering the training and expertise requirements for IJs, and instructing IJs to dismiss cases to allow the Administration to place individuals in fast-track removal proceedings. These actions, along with the Administration's mass deportation agenda, are undermining the due process rights of immigrants and their ability to seek adequate relief in immigration court. There is a significant and growing need for legal counsel in immigration proceedings.

To meet the moment, the United States must cultivate a robust immigrant legal defense field. This commitment would ensure that every individual receives high-quality representation, regardless of their financial resources or the perceived strength of their case.

The *SHIELD Act* would help safeguard due process rights and promote fairness and accountability in immigration proceedings. Specifically, the *SHIELD Act* would:

- Allocate \$100 million for a grant program to develop a legal services workforce that meets the representation needs of people facing removal and that provides high-quality, comprehensive, and linguistically appropriate legal services;
- Provide four-year renewable competitive grants through the Department of Justice's (DOJ) Office for Access to Justice to state and local governments, as well as nonprofit organizations and educational institutions that train legal staff or provide legal services to individuals facing removal;
- Fund workforce recruitment and training programs, regional coordination services, and technical assistance, such as language training and leadership development programs;
- Support both preexisting state and local programs needing additional funding for legal defense as well as underserved areas where state and local investments are scarce despite substantial need; and
- Require recipients to verify that the use of funds aligns with requirements set by DOJ and to submit annual reports on the effectiveness of activities funded by the grants.