When COVID-19 hit, Florence Project staff were forced to pivot immediately to provide our free, high-quality legal services remotely to people in detention. While providing legal services via phone or video-teleconference is far from ideal, we had no other choice during a deadly global pandemic.

Our team scrambled to set up a free telephone hotline for people in immigration detention in Arizona, and for over a year now, members of our Detention Action & Response Team (DART) have been fielding calls on a daily basis, rotating to make sure there is always someone available to pick up the phone during designated hotline hours. The hotline has been a critical way we can provide legal services and connect with people in ICE detention during this crisis.

“We are the frontline workers,” Mindy Butler-Christensen, a DART attorney, reflected. “When there’s a crisis, clients reach out, hoping that we’re able to answer. And I believe we have.”

Many of the calls we receive on the hotline are extremely difficult to hear, especially day after day, when we often feel like we can do so little to help. People who call us from immigration detention are processing trauma that they experienced in their home countries, during their journeys to the United States, or trauma from being separated from their loved ones. They’re also living through a traumatizing experience, isolated in detention centers that have become COVID-19 hotspots.

A lot of the people who called us over the past year had medical conditions and were worried about becoming ill with coronavirus in the crowded “pods” or “tanques” where people can be held for months or even years while fighting their immigration case. The experience was harrowing for those who didn’t become infected with COVID-19 or don’t have pre-existing medical conditions as well.

People often told us that they have been locked up in their cells for longer periods of time during the pandemic, and that there’s extremely limited time to make calls, take showers, or send and receive mail. Active outbreaks meant that people were regularly put into quarantine and constantly fearful of becoming sick.

One such client, who actually contracted COVID-19 in detention, spent fourteen days in isolation, dangerously ill and very much alone. “I had to fight against COVID-19, but I also had to fight the depression, fear, and loneliness that grew worse each day.”

Every time we picked up the phone, we heard details of the crushing reality of life in detention.

“"I don’t know what they look like, but they know my voice, and I know theirs,” Mindy shared. “I can sense relief in their voice when I pick up the phone.”

In addition to the fear and desperation people were experiencing because of the isolation of being detained during a global pandemic, many expressed feeling lost and confused about their cases; some didn’t understand why they were detained or what was happening. The hotline has proved vital in helping people understand their legal options and making sure they have the resources they need to advocate for themselves.

The hotline also lets detained immigrants know they’re not alone. We provide a sympathetic ear as they share their struggles. We listen to their concerns and advocate alongside our clients to blow the whistle on inhumane conditions inside these facilities.

Thanks to your generosity, we were able to quickly adapt during the global pandemic, providing high-quality legal services remotely, a lifeline to clients during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Belinda misses helping people feel confident in their appearance. When she was a child, she didn’t always feel confident, which she relates to her “Super Chica” fandom.

“Wonder Woman is my favorite. Perhaps because my childhood wasn’t pretty, I want to recover what I never felt by watching these types of films.”

Despite the dangers faced by transgender women in Mexico, Belinda can still be deported. She remains resilient and thanks the Florence Project attorneys, legal assistants, social workers, and supporters for their vigorous support.

“All those I’ve met have given me lots of understanding,” she says. “It lifted me out of loneliness, because I was so lonely, not seeing anyone who was close to me. I was alone in a situation that I’d never been in. The Florence Project gave me confidence, peace of mind, and so much strength inside. I’ve believed in them since that moment, and I’m here, look, talking to you now.”

Belinda walks through her favorite park in Phoenix, a community she has called home for many years. She looks pensive while pausing on a footbridge, and she smiles by a tree that is not native to Arizona, but with care has thrived here, nonetheless.

“I love superhero movies, and I wished I had a superpower in certain moments of my life,” Belinda says. “All I have is my voice.”

Several years ago, Belinda worked as a hairstylist in Casa Grande, Arizona, until one day, an illness overwhelmed her on a night out with friends. Someone called an ambulance, and the emergency escalated into a crisis when law enforcement responded. Belinda was placed in immigration removal proceedings because she is a noncitizen.

“I believe all humans deserve respect, whether we’re trans, gay, men, women—we’re human beings,” Belinda says. She experienced verbal abuse from facility guards, she says. As a transgender woman, Belinda felt unsafe incarcerated in the men’s facility and at one point she was assaulted. Allegedly for her protection, Belinda was placed in solitary confinement. Transgender women are often put into segregation, punishing them rather than the people who victimize or harass them.

Suddenly, the sensitive woman whose favorite activity was to chat with customers at the salon found herself isolated and trapped. “They call it ‘the hole,’” Belinda recalls. “I was crying and asking God to get me out of there. I figured they would send me to my country. Not once did I think I would be like I am now, outside.”

Belinda struggled with the uncertainty about how long she would be detained. “For your sanity, you have to know those facts,” she says. Over time, Belinda’s panic and sorrow transformed into numb despair.

“When you’re detained, what you feel is immense sadness. After feeling this great sadness, there’s a great loneliness. You suffer depression,” Belinda explains. “Eventually, it’s like being submerged in a pool up to your head. You don’t have many thoughts. The few thoughts you do have, realistically, you can’t use because you’re locked up. You bury your feelings in your body and mind, and that makes you very sick.”

Belinda missed being around her loved ones; she migrated to the U.S. with her family many years ago. The minimal access to sunlight, the cold air-conditioned temperature, and mistreatment from guards also affected her.

She passed her time “in tears,” but hid her anguish inside. “I don’t like to be one of those people that shows I’m sad. I cried on the inside. Then when I laid down, I let myself cry. At times I didn’t sleep because I’d been crying. These months, for me, were hard.”

Belinda fantasized that a superhero would rescue her. Empowerment came instead when she connected with a Florence Project attorney who she described as “a light in my life.” Liz Bradley told Belinda about her rights and what types of relief she might qualify for under immigration law.

“It meant a lot to realize there are citizens of this country that support me,” Belinda says. “Liz told me she would fight for me. She looked at my case and told me, ‘We’re going to do everything possible to help you.’”

“I thought to myself, ‘I’m going to get out of here.’ I’ve felt better ever since the first day we met and she said, ‘I’m your attorney. I work for the Florence Project.’”

After six months in detention, Belinda was released. But her case remains open, and the Florence Project continues to fight for her in court.

Belinda now works as a custodian. She still cuts her friends’ hair and takes pride in the fact that during her years at the salon, she retained some customers from when they were babies until they were teenagers.
get the blockbuster decision we may have hoped for, we celebrate the victory of both the initial ruling about the unconstitutionality of the conditions and the release of 21 clients.

When people detained in La Palma and Eloy detention facilities blew the whistle on the abhorrent conditions during the height of the COVID-19 outbreak, we worked with national media outlets to share the letters they sent begging for help.

“This place is a concentration camp where we can only wait for the worst,” reads one letter. “We’re begging you for help because this is a life-or-death situation,” reads another.

Our Advocacy Team also coordinated with teams across the Florence Project to submit comments opposing proposed rules that sought to further decimate access to asylum and due process in our immigration system, including one that would have rendered virtually all applicants ineligible for asylum.

However, advocacy at the Florence Project goes even deeper than the work of our Advocacy Team.

Our Border Action Team continues advocating tirelessly for the end of dangerous, cruel policies like the border closure under Title 42 and the Migrant Protection Protocols, as well as for countless individuals impacted by these policies.

Title 42 is a provision through which people seeking safety in the U.S. are immediately expelled to Mexico or their country of origin, under the guise of a public health measure. Lawyers and public health experts alike have called for this dangerous and unjust policy to be revoked.

The Migrant Protection Protocols (also known as “Remain in Mexico”) were a Trump-era policy that essentially blocked access to asylum for all those seeking safety in the U.S. and forced them to wait in dangerous conditions in Mexico for their asylum claims to be resolved.

advocacy during a global pandemic

2020 brought dramatic changes to the world at large and to the Florence Project. In January, the Florence Project formed an Advocacy Team, bringing together our legal director, two attorneys, a legal assistant, and the communications manager to focus on legal and legislative advocacy, impact litigation, media, and communications campaigns, amplifying the important everyday work of our legal and social services teams.

Throughout the year, the Advocacy Team collaborated with other teams at the Florence Project, partner organizations, and pro bono attorneys to expose the dismal conditions in ICE detention that our clients reported during the COVID-19 pandemic and to advocate for their safety and human rights.

In April, we joined the law firm Perkins Coie, the ACLU, and the ACLU of Arizona to sue the government, demanding the release of medically vulnerable people from immigration detention. We filed a second lawsuit in June. In the first case, the judge ruled that the conditions of confinement violated the constitution and gave ICE the opportunity to remedy the situation, and the last client was released before the judge issued any subsequent ruling. In the second case, our clients were released before a ruling could be made. This type of advocacy was a first for the Florence Project and while we did not

Our Children’s Program formed a rapid response team to immediately intervene when we received reports of children held in Arizona hotels, an unregulated shadow detention system formed to enforce the border closure against minors. When we learned about this dangerous practice, our Children’s Program immediately established a rotation of “on-call” attorneys and legal assistants who were able to drop everything and intervene in a child’s case, to ensure they had access to legal counsel. We advocated for children to be removed from these unlawful rapid expulsion proceedings and be instead placed in traditional immigration proceedings, while in the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR).

Our Adult Program filed countless humanitarian parole requests and habeas petitions to secure releases for adults who were detained in ICE facilities that were proving to be COVID-19 hotspots. In addition to fighting for clients’ release, we established a legal help hotline and continued to provide legal orientation presentations and legal representation remotely throughout the pandemic. We secured release from immigration detention for over 160 people and assisted countless others in navigating the system and advocating for their own release.

Our Social Services Team safely completed over 280 supply drops to clients, including emergency food bags, basic hygiene supplies, and necessities for families such as diapers. Florence Project social workers also supported many requests for release from detention with travel and lodging plans and advocated for at least 20 children to be released on their own recognizance and be instead placed in traditional immigration proceedings, while in the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR).
The Florence Project Children’s Program serves many of its young clients for several years. Seeing them grow up and pursue their dreams is incredibly rewarding, and we want to share that joy with you. Sonia migrated from Guatemala at age 16 and now, at 22-years-old, she has finally received her Legal Permanent Residency!

Standing with Hugo Rodríguez, one of eight Florence Project advocates to assist her over the years, Sonia expressed thanks and celebrated the impact the Green Card will have on her life, and her baby’s.

Sonia is pregnant. Her first child is due soon. As a Legal Permanent Resident, Sonia won’t have to fear being separated and removed from him and his father. A stressful 2020 ended with new beginnings for Sonia, both in her legal status and now with motherhood on the horizon. Sonia and her partner live in the Phoenix community and are thrilled for the security the Legal Permanent Residency provides them as a family.

“She stressed a lot,” Hugo says regarding the final steps of Sonia’s adjustment of status. “When we got her approval, she choked up because of what it means for her to be able to stay with her child.”

The Florence Project first connected with Sonia in 2016, shortly after her release from a children’s shelter in Texas. She had moved in with a family member in Phoenix. Having fled extreme neglect in Guatemala, she was eligible for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS). The Florence Project Children’s Program assisted her with the daunting application process and represented her in both Arizona state juvenile court and immigration court.

“I had never been to court before. I was very worried, thinking they wanted to deport me to Guatemala, and because everyone was a stranger,” Sonia recalls. “But there was an interpreter and they treated me well, as did the judge and the Florence Project lawyers who were with me. They did everything possible to win my case.”

“I trusted the Florence Project a lot, and this is the result of the work of all those who supported me.”

Florence Project Legal Assistant Ana María Miranda says Sonia was always in a joyful mood when they spoke, even though she knew that she had a long road ahead of her. “Having Legal Permanent Resident status here in the U.S., Sonia can now chase her goals and dreams. She can live in the U.S. with less fear and anxiety than before. I am ecstatic for Sonia and what her future holds.”

Back in 2016, when the Florence Project took on Sonia’s case, work permits were quickly granted for young migrants pursuing the Special Immigrant Juvenile Status visa. The work permit helped immensely in lifting Sonia’s spirits and giving her confidence in the immigration process. Sadly, due to current backlogs, it can now take several years to obtain work permits, making life difficult for those with pending applications.
Sonia currently works for a company that packages jellies and syrups, and recently she was promoted from the assembly line to a quality control position. She intends to continue her education soon to improve her English with hopes of working in an office someday as a receptionist. Sonia enjoys conversing with people and helping others in a bilingual environment.

Hugo believes she will succeed: “She’s one of the most attentive clients I’ve worked with.” Ana Maria also mentions that Sonia “was very responsible about her legal case and attentive to anything we needed from her. I can’t wait to see what her future holds.”

Upon reaching this milestone, Sonia reflected on her first months adapting to life in Phoenix. The hardest part was getting to know the city -- recognizing the streets and avenues, finding a pharmacy and a supermarket, learning the bus system.

What seemed most foreign at the time was the way strangers room together to afford housing in the U.S. “In Guatemala, you live in a house with your parents or your kids, but here in the United States, I’ve seen people live together that barely know each other, because they’re renting a room. That seemed odd to me.”

Sonia has proved clever and resilient throughout her journey and is now adjusting to pregnancy. “No one is ever truly ready to be pregnant,” she admits. “It feels strange at times. It’s something new for me that I’m experiencing day by day and I’m trying to do well.”

“I want the best education for my son,” Sonia adds, “and that he has great opportunities in his life, and that when he grows up, he can become a doctor, or whatever he wants.”
2020 Pro Bono Attorneys

Barnidle Adeluyo, Adeluyo Law Firm PLLC
Michael Ward, Atlas & Bird LLC
Douglas E. Hewlett, Jr., Arent Fox LLP
Gregory Altschuh, Attorney at Law
Cabell Breckenridge, Attorney at Law
Hiram Fenjac, Attorney at Law
Dale Furnish, Attorney at Law
Erik Johnson, Attorney at Law
Nicos C. Livoni, Attorney at Law
Thomas Maroun, Attorney at Law
Theodore Medekler, Attorney at Law
Mary Jo Forman Miller, Attorney at Law
Nicolae Nakaj, Attorney at Law
Antionette Rodriguez, Attorney at Law
Ajinur Setiwaldi, Attorney at Law
Jennifer Settles, Attorney at Law
Ajinur Setiwaldi, Attorney at Law
Antionette Rodriguez, Attorney at Law

Florence Project clients jump for joy after being reunited in freedom.

2020 ANNUAL REPORT

THE FLORENCE PROJECT

Margaret Sierra, Silva & Fonseca
Ronita Khalakhor, Simpson Thacher & Bartlett
Jacob Waschak, Simpson Thacher & Bartlett
Eriq Singer, Singer Immigration Law
Ambersee Conley, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Kelly Dal, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Anthony Eulano, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Alayha Gilbert, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Matthew Grumbling, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Benjamin Hawkins, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Courtney Herson, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Edward Hermes, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Russell M. Johnson, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Jessica Kemper, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Gabrielle Morlock, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Lauren Munsell, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Benjamin Nucci, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Shalayne Pillar, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Lauren Podgorski, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Jennifer Puchalski, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Rachael Peters Pugel, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Soheila Shahidi, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Alexis Tenguez, Snell & Wilmer LLP
John Vythol, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Kevin W. Wright, Snell & Wilmer LLP
Bryan Soto, Soto-Law, PLLC
Andrew Knepp, Southwest Law School
Alexis Montano, Squire Patton Boggs LLP
Lisa Panahi, State Bar of Arizona
Samantha Baker, Law Offices of Davis S. Steingold PLLC
David S. Steingold, Law Offices of David S. Steingold PLLC
Monika Sud-Devaraj, Law Offices of Monika Sud-Devaraj PLLC
David Gottlieb, University of Kansas School of Law
Vianey Hurtado, Vianey K. Hurtado Law, PLLC
Anish Lannaga Buriaga, Villanova University, Charles Widger School of Law
Katherine Winkle, Winkle Law Firm
Juliana C. Manzanarez, Ybarra
Maldonado Law Group
2020 Financials

Thanks to your generosity, the Florence Project has been able to build a reserve to sustain our growth, handle the drastic increase in detention and the COVID-19 pandemic, and to strategically respond to further attacks on immigrants’ rights. As always, we will put every dollar available toward meeting the needs of detained immigrants. Thank you for joining us in defending due process and human rights!

Revenue
- Contracted Legal Services: $8,956,492 (56%)
- Individual Contributions: $2,996,584 (18%)
- Foundations: $3,936,517 (25%)
- Other: $107,783 (1%)
- Total: $15,997,377

Expenses
- Program Services: $11,129,958 (86%)
- Operating Costs: $1,017,486 (8%)
- Fundraising: $253,274 (6%)
- Total: $12,400,718

Assets
- Total Net Assets Beginning of 2020: $13,149,670
- Temporarily Restricted by Donor: $3,622,641
- Temporarily Restricted by Board: $6,100,000
- Ending Assets for 2020: $16,246,329
Our new booklet, “Together: The Florence Project’s Response to the Family Separation Crisis” is available now at firrp.org/familyseparation.