

Impact Report



Making Safety and Stability a Reality for Edgar



EDGAR WITH DE NOVO IMMIGRATION ATTORNEY KAREN BOBADILLA

Edgar was 8 years old when he went to work in the fields, cutting coffee and growing beans and corn in his small Honduran village. Each day he would rise at 5:30am and walk a half-hour with his mother to labor in the hot sun, and he was always very dirty when they came home, he says.

Edgar's father disappeared when he was 3, and left his mother to care for him and his four siblings. Edgar's mother worked hard as a farm laborer, but there was never enough to eat at home. She wanted them to go to school, too, but the fees were expensive. "I was very interested in learning more about computers

and technology, but our school only had a few computers, which rarely worked, and we had no internet access."

When he was 12, Edgar had to leave school for good so that he could work more and help support his younger siblings. He continued to study on weekends but was never able to scrape together the tuition money to attend high school.

"I wanted to go to university so that I could have a good, professional job and do something important," he says, "not just work in the fields for my whole life."

With the help of a De Novo attorney, Edgar was able to obtain special findings in Probate and Family Court that he had been abandoned by his father, making him eligible for Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) Status. SIJS offers a path to permanent residence in the U.S. for young people who have been abandoned, abused, or neglected by one or both parents. Then, Edgar worked with an immigration attorney at De Novo to file an SIJS petition.

Waiting for a decision was not easy for Edgar. His SIJS petition was among tens of thousands caught in a years-long backlog at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). As the years passed, Edgar finished high school and, under a new deferred action program, received his work authorization and started working at a restaurant. In early December, after more than 4 years of waiting, he finally received a decision — Edgar was granted his green card.

- » The U.S. limits the number of green cards USCIS can award under the Special Immigrant Juvenile program annually by country of origin, despite SIJS being a humanitarian status. Demand has significantly outpaced the supply and has caused an extraordinary backlog.
- » Young immigrants from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador are the most affected by the caps and wait, on average, four years for a green card. The lines have gotten so long that USCIS is only processing applications submitted before March 2018.
- » A new policy, which went into effect in May 2022, provides for young people stuck in the SIJS backlog to be granted deferred action, which allows them to apply for work authorization. Still, without a green card, they are ineligible for financial aid and live in constant fear of being detained and deported.

Eleanor Newhoff Receives Prestigious Adams Pro Bono Publico Award

In a ceremony at the John Adams Courthouse in Boston on October 26, long-time De Novo volunteer attorney Eleanor Newhoff was honored with the 2022 Adams Pro Bono Publico Award. Attorney Newhoff was recognized by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court's Standing Committee on Pro Bono Legal Services for her extraordinary dedication to pro bono work throughout her career, especially on behalf of immigrants and victims of crime and domestic violence, and to mentoring other pro bono attorneys.

Attorney Eleanor Newhoff is pictured with De Novo staff, from left: Immigration Attorney Nicole Murray, Deputy Director John Froio, Volunteer Coordinator Nora Sears, and Executive Director Mojdeh Rohani.



“Of the pro bono work I have done, I have been particularly inspired by the generosity, strength, and resoluteness of asylum seekers who have suffered a loss of place in their culture and country, and yet continue to struggle for their beliefs, their identities, and their right to live their lives as the people they are.”

— Eleanor Newhoff

Eleanor Newhoff first came to De Novo as a volunteer immigration attorney in 1977. Over the years, she has provided pro bono legal representation to over 165 asylum seekers, victims of crime, special immigrant juveniles, and survivors of domestic violence. Eleanor has also been instrumental in the success of De Novo's monthly Immigration Legal Screening Clinic, having dedicated 300 hours of service to the clinic since its launch in 2017.

In addition to her pro bono cases, Eleanor has given her time to advise other attorney volunteers who are less experienced in immigration law. She has provided mentoring for two staff attorneys and a legal assistant on De Novo's immigration team as well as consulted with experienced attorneys on difficult cases. Her willingness to share her knowledge with

other volunteers, attorneys, and paralegals demonstrates her passion for increasing immigrant supports at every level, not just through those who she can individually help.

“I have learned from my clients on so many occasions that where there is a bridge that has collapsed in their lives, leaving them stranded and without legal support, or they found themselves alone and without a way to confront the challenges they are facing, that reaching out a hand as a pro bono attorney helped them, yes, but also opened a window for me into their lives,” Eleanor remarked. “As I learn more about my clients' worlds and life experiences, both my understanding and my ability to help has increased.”

Eleanor has a long career of serving immigrants through her private practice, Newhoff Law Office, as well as in the roles of immigration supervisor at De Novo (then Community Legal Services and Counseling Center), immigration attorney at Greater Boston Legal Services, and clinical instructor at the Harvard Immigration and Refugee Clinic.



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De Novo Assistant Legal Director Elizabeth Brusie Recognized as 2022 Top Woman of Law



De Novo Assistant Legal Director Elizabeth Brusie was recognized by *Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly* at its 2022 Top Women of Law event, held in Boston on November 16, 2022. Elizabeth joined De Novo in 2017, and

in addition to co-managing the legal program, she represents domestic violence survivors in the Probate & Family, Boston Municipal, and District Courts. "I have always practiced law interdisciplinarily and I believe it is the best way to reach clients who are struggling with issues related to poverty and violence," says Elizabeth.

A few years ago, Elizabeth represented a client in a long, complicated probate case. At the beginning of their work together, the client struggled to function without frequently breaking down. As time went on, she gradually began speaking up for herself. Not long after, the client's ex-husband began violating

the terms of the settlement and the client pursued the contempt matter by herself—and won.

"I was so proud of her," Elizabeth remembers. "She told me that she was just modeling what I had done. That my representation helped to build her capacity so that she could represent herself was an amazing feeling."

Elizabeth is a hearing officer for the Board of Overseers and chairs its Hearing Committee. She has served on the Access to Justice Section Council of the Mass. Bar Association since 2017 and is a former co-chair of the Women's Bar Association Amicus Committee.

Executive Director Mojdeh Rohani traveled to Burundi and Rwanda in November 2022 with colleagues from the Boston University School of Social Work Center for Innovation in Social Work & Health. They visited the University of Global Health Equity in Rwanda, rural hospitals, a psychiatric facility, and grassroots organizations with a focus on forming partnerships that would further enhance capacity in education and training in mental health, research, evaluation, and infrastructure.

"I am in awe of the dedication, commitment, creativity and most notably humility of colleagues we met during the trip," says Rohani. "They have overcome insurmountable challenges under the most difficult circumstances and often with extremely limited resources, all in the spirit of true service to the community."



Above: A mental health home visit with a Rwandan Genocide survivor and his family by a community health worker, who is often highly-trusted by community members, leaders, and elders.



Left: Visit to a psychiatric hospital in Bujumbura, Burundi with Gilbert Ndayishimiye (L), who is the only psychiatric nurse in Burundi, and Dr. Jean Baptiste Mbonyingingo (R), the Village Health Works Medical Director in Kigutu, Burundi.

2022: Year in Review

In its fiscal year 2022, De Novo provided integrated legal, mental health, and case management services to 1,651 people, helping the most vulnerable members of our community to overcome the impacts of poverty, inequity, and trauma.

» **211 survivors of domestic violence** and their children secured long-term legal protection from violence and abuse, safe custody and visitation, and financial stability through child/spousal support and health care.

» **628 immigrants and asylum seekers** received legal help to avoid deportation, obtain work authorization, and gain a path to citizenship. Among our clients are survivors of torture and persecution, victims of domestic violence or crime, and unaccompanied children fleeing violence or who have been abandoned, abused or neglected by their parents.

248 families received free legal advice at our monthly immigration clinic, a partnership with the City of Cambridge. In Jan. 2022, De Novo launched a second monthly immigration clinic in collaboration with The Welcome Project in Somerville.

» **49 people living with disabilities** obtained or retained SSI and SSDI benefits and other assistance, such as health care access, utility discounts, and transportation vouchers. De Novo also assists clients with work-related overpayment cases.

» **296 low-income tenants** at risk of eviction obtained or retained access to safe and affordable housing, obtained reasonable accommodations, and enforced their legal rights to fair housing.

80 tenants received legal advice, assistance in drafting pleadings, support in negotiation and mediation, and limited in-court representation at our weekly Housing Court Lawyer for the Day Clinic.

» **409 uninsured or underinsured adults** received mental health services at little or no cost, including individual therapy, assessments and referrals, group counseling, and forensic psychological evaluations for survivors of torture and gender-based violence to support their humanitarian relief applications.

» **58 families were supported with case management services**, such as safety planning, housing navigation, food and clothing assistance, technology assistance, transportation stipends, and health insurance enrollment, among many other services.

Staff News

Eneyda Benitez was hired as bilingual Administrative Assistant in Nov. 2022. She was previously a Family Liaison for the O'Donnell Elementary School in East Boston.

Eric Bove was hired as a Housing and Disability Attorney in Oct. 2022. He previously served as an attorney advisor for the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination.

Robert Lae Wild was hired as a bilingual Clinical Social Worker for the MetroWest region in Aug. 2022. He previously worked with the Boston Center for Refugee Health & Human Rights at Boston Medical Center.

Michael Marciano was hired as a part-time Disability Attorney in Dec. 2022. He brings to De Novo more than 15 years' experience in social security disability law.

Liam O'Leary was hired as a Housing Attorney in Dec. 2022. He previously served as a staff attorney with the New Hampshire Public Defender.

Paulette O'Sullivan was hired as an Immigration Legal Assistant in Sept. 2022. She previously worked with the Consulate General of Mexico in Boston.

Abigail Rosenfeld was hired as a Housing and Disability Attorney in Oct. 2022. She was previously a Law Clerk for the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania.

Aidan Wertz joined De Novo's Immigration Unit as an Americorps Legal Advocate in Sept. 2022. He is a recent graduate of Middlebury College.