

The DOJ Quietly Gutted a 60-Year-Old Program That Helps Immigrants Get Legal Help. Here's What That Means for Our Community.

By Vanessa Frank, Immigration Attorney and Founder, MARIPOSA Advocacy and Legal Services

Last month, the federal Department of Justice quietly reassigned all of the senior attorneys who staffed the [Recognition and Accreditation \(R&A\) Program](#). No press release, no public announcement. CBS News broke the [story](#), and organizations across the country found out by reading the news, the same as everyone else.

What is the Recognition and Accreditation (R&A) Program

The Recognition and Accreditation (R&A) Program has existed for more than 60 years. It started because churches and faith communities, specifically Catholic Charities and Jewish Family Services, saw low-income immigrants needing legal help and there were not enough immigration attorneys to provide it. The R&A Program allows trained non-attorneys, working as employees or volunteers at Recognized Nonprofit Organizations, to become “Accredited” by the Department of Justice (DOJ) to practice immigration law. *Partial Accredited Representatives* can help clients apply for green cards, citizenship, and a range of humanitarian protections. *Full Accredited Representatives* can advise on applications and represent clients in Immigration Court. Neither type of Accredited Representative may practice any other type of legal services.

Earning DOJ accreditation is not a rubber stamp. A candidate must demonstrate broad knowledge and adequate experience in immigration law through a current resume, documented completion of coursework, and letters of recommendation addressing the candidate’s qualifications, legal experience, and fitness to competently represent clients. They must also pass a criminal background check. Once approved, Accreditation is valid for three years, after which the Representative must apply for renewal, submitting evidence of competency and at least ten hours of continuing immigration training per year and renew on time or lose their standing.

More than 2,600 accredited representatives currently work across more than 900 recognized programs nationwide.

What is happening now?

The handful of senior attorneys who adjudicated the applications for Recognition and Accreditation were abruptly reassigned to Immigration Courts as entry-level law clerks, a job normally held by people fresh out of law school. Left behind to run this critical agency were two support staff with no legal authority to approve or renew accreditation applications.

The sidelining of career attorneys who worked in this program across multiple administrations is hard to read as anything other than an effort to reduce access to legal assistance and advocacy. This follows the pattern we have seen across the federal government since January of 2025: the DOJ also removed the head of the Office of Legal Access Programs, cut legal orientation services for unaccompanied children and detained families, and has fired more than 100 immigration judges, replacing them in many cases with attorneys who had been making their career as military Judge Advocate Generals; JAGs specialize in the largely unrelated military codes of conduct.

What This Means Right Now

Currently accredited organizations who file their renewal application on time can continue working while their renewal is pending. That protection is real, at least for now.

But, organizations that have never been accredited, such as MARIPOSA Advocacy and Legal Services, are stuck because no one is reviewing applications. No timeline has been given. No explanation has been offered.

We formed as MARIPOSA, seeking accreditation, because we want to expand the legal services we can offer here on the Central Coast. We have staff who finished their training and submitted their applications over 6 months ago and we are going to keep submitting applications as they are ready. When the people push hard enough to get this program restored, MARIPOSA will be there, by their side, ready and able to provide a wide range of services and advocacy for our community.

One more thing: just because legal help disappears, does not mean people stop needing it. They turn to notarios and others who are not authorized to practice immigration law, who charge for services they cannot legally provide, and whose mistakes often end in deportation. Gutting the R&A Program does not clean up the immigration system. It creates more openings for fraud and more crises for families.

What You Can Do

Call or write your congressional representatives. Ask them to formally inquire with the Department of Justice's Executive Office for Immigration Review about the R&A Program's current staffing and push them to return the career attorneys who ran it. These are professionals who spent their careers making this program work. Reassigning them to entry-level clerk jobs is a waste of expertise, a disservice to the public, and a plain attempt to sideline a key tool for immigrant families to assert their rights.

This kind of administrative change rarely stays in the news for long. The consequences, however, ripple across generations and throughout our entire community. In the past year, we have all learned how our broken immigration system has affected all aspects of our lives, from family members living in fear, to community members withdrawing from society, to employers and employees facing uncertainty and disruptions.

We Keep Going

[MARIPOSA](#) staff and our [Youth Right to Rise](#) leaders travelled to Sacramento in mid-April as part of the annual [Immigrant Day of Action](#). We met with state legislators on immigration-related bills and worked with advocates from across California, sharing information and successes including [Swap Meet Justice](#), our Family Preparedness Plans, and our particular style of community education, using methods developed by Teatro Campesino.

[805UndocuFund](#) provided a bus so that community members who cannot fly due to their immigration status could be part of the conversation.

Our whole community deserves an immigration system that works. We are going to keep showing up until it does.

Vanessa Frank is the founder of MARIPOSA Advocacy and Legal Services and a licensed immigration attorney on the Central Coast. To learn more or get involved, visit MARIPOSAadvocacy.org