

Advocacy for Migrants: Legal, Social, and Health Perspectives

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Advocacy for migrants is a critical component of social justice, focused on protecting and empowering individuals who leave their home countries due to violence, economic hardship, or the pursuit of better opportunities. This advocacy takes many forms, including raising public awareness, providing direct services, and pursuing legal and policy reforms to protect migrants' rights. During the first Trump administration, immigration became one of the most divisive and prominent issues in the United States. The administration implemented a series of restrictive policies aimed at deterring both unauthorized and legal immigration.¹ In response, migrant advocacy groups, civil rights organizations, and international institutions mobilized legal challenges, grassroots activism, and public campaigns to defend migrant rights and highlight the broader humanitarian and public health consequences of these policies.²

One of the most controversial measures introduced during this period was the “zero-tolerance” policy, which mandated criminal prosecution for unauthorized border crossings and led to the separation of thousands of children from their parents. Although the administration framed the policy as a strict enforcement of existing law, it drew widespread condemnation for its humanitarian impact.^{2,3} Amnesty International described the practice as resulting in “serious human rights violations,” emphasizing the psychological trauma inflicted on families.² Advocacy organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES) played a central role in challenging the policy through litigation and public protests. In response, federal courts ordered the reunification of separated families, although the process was slow, and many families continued to face long-term consequences.

Another significant area of advocacy emerged in response to the travel ban targeting seven predominantly Muslim-majority countries. Civil rights groups, including the ACLU, the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP), and the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), quickly filed legal challenges arguing that the policy was discriminatory and violated principles of religious freedom. Although earlier versions of the ban were blocked, a revised version was ultimately upheld by the Supreme Court in *Trump v. Hawaii*.⁴ The decision underscored the limits of judicial

intervention while also intensifying public debate over the balance between national security and civil liberties. The attempted termination of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) also became a focal point for advocacy. DACA provided temporary protection from deportation for undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children, often referred to as “Dreamers.” When the administration moved to end the program in 2017, organizations such as United We Dream and the National Immigration Law Center (NILC) organized nationwide campaigns and filed legal challenges. In 2020, the Supreme Court ruled in *Department of Homeland Security v. Regents of the University of California* that the termination had been carried out improperly, allowing the program to continue temporarily.⁵ This outcome demonstrated the effectiveness of legal advocacy in protecting vulnerable immigrant populations, even in the face of shifting political priorities.

Advocacy efforts also targeted the expansion of the “public charge” rule, which made it more difficult for immigrants who used public assistance to obtain legal status.⁶ Critics argued that the policy disproportionately affected low-income families and created a “chilling effect,” discouraging immigrants from accessing essential services such as healthcare. The NILC highlighted how fear of jeopardizing immigration status led many families to avoid critical support systems, thereby exacerbating social and economic inequalities.⁶

Similarly, the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), commonly known as the “Remain in Mexico” policy, required asylum seekers to wait in Mexico while their cases were processed in U.S. courts. Advocacy organizations raised serious concerns about the dangers migrants faced, including violence, exploitation, and unsafe living conditions. Human Rights First documented numerous cases of kidnapping and assault among affected individuals.⁷ Legal challenges and advocacy campaigns sought to end the program, emphasizing both humanitarian risks and violations of international asylum protections.^{1, 7,8}

Beyond opposing specific policies, advocacy organizations worked extensively to support migrants from Central America, many of whom were escaping political instability and life-threatening conditions at home. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that many of these individuals were fleeing such conditions, reinforcing the need for international protection.⁸ Advocacy groups provided legal assistance, humanitarian aid, and public education campaigns to address both immediate needs and the structural causes of migration.

At the same time, advocates pushed for comprehensive immigration reform, including pathways to citizenship and permanent protections for DACA recipients; however, deep political divisions in Congress limited legislative progress. As a result, much of the advocacy work during this period focused

on the courts, public opinion, and direct community support. Public demonstrations played a crucial role in shaping national discourse. Movements such as #FamiliesBelongTogether mobilized widespread participation and drew attention to the human impact of immigration policies, contributing to increased public scrutiny and engagement.⁹

Importantly, the intersection of immigration policy and public health became increasingly evident. Recent analyses of border regions have highlighted the strain on local healthcare systems and the essential role of community-based responses in addressing migrants' needs.⁹ Medical professionals have emphasized that restricting access to healthcare not only harms migrants but also undermines broader public health outcomes. These concerns are further illustrated on [Unsettled: Migrant Health in the U.S.](#), a podcast that examines the health experiences of migrants and asylum seekers. The podcast highlights key challenges, including limited access to medical services, unsafe conditions in detention centers, and the long-term mental health effects of migration and enforcement policies. It also underscores how fear of immigration enforcement discourages individuals from seeking medical care, leading to worse health outcomes and increased vulnerability.^{9,10}

Episodes focusing on border regions such as El Paso emphasize the resilience of local communities and organizations that provide care despite limited resources. Additional themes include the health impacts of detention, the experiences of undocumented youth, and vaccine hesitancy within immigrant communities. Together, these perspectives reinforce the broader argument that immigration policy is not solely a legal or political issue but also a critical public health concern.

In conclusion, advocacy for migrants during the first Trump administration was multifaceted, encompassing legal action, public protest, and community-based support, and these efforts remain relevant as similar debates continue into his second term in office. While the administration prioritized enforcement and deterrence, advocacy groups worked to defend human rights, challenge discriminatory policies, and highlight the lived experiences of migrants.^{2,7} Their efforts not only influenced key legal outcomes but also contributed to an ongoing national conversation about immigration, public health, and social justice. As debates over immigration policy continue, the role of advocacy remains essential in promoting more humane and equitable approaches.

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