

MISCELLANEOUS

Advocating for Migrants: A Framework for Effective and Ethical Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Migrant advocacy encompasses a broad range of activities intended to protect the rights, dignity, and wellbeing of individuals who have crossed international or internal borders. This article presents a structured framework for migrant advocacy, organized around eight sequential stages: knowledge acquisition, role selection, institutional partnership, relational practice, civic engagement, information stewardship, resource mobilization, and advocate sustainability. Drawing on principles from community organizing, human rights practice, and social work ethics, the article argues that effective advocacy is distinguished less by intensity of effort than by its groundedness in accurate information, community-led priorities, and institutional coordination. The framework is intended as a practical reference for individuals, students, and organizations seeking to engage in migrant advocacy in a manner that is both impactful and ethically sound.

1. Introduction

Migration—whether driven by conflict, economic precarity, environmental change, or persecution—has become one of the defining social phenomena of the contemporary era. Migrants frequently encounter legal precarity, economic marginalization, and social exclusion in host societies, conditions that create demand for advocacy from civil society actors. However, advocacy efforts vary considerably in effectiveness, and poorly designed interventions can inadvertently reinforce paternalistic dynamics or produce limited practical benefit. This article is by Dr. Roberto “Bert” Johansson, a board-certified pediatrician and pediatric critical care physician who works on the USA/Mexico border. Born to immigrants himself, he is very proud of his family. He learned how to care and advocate for migrants for his mentors, Dr. Bernard Dreyer and Dr. Alan Ross. Johansson was part of the Child Advocacy Commission and the MedCAREs Clinic for Child Abuse. In this article, Dr. Johansson consolidates his decades of experience to propose a structured, sequential framework intended to guide advocates—whether newcomers to the field or established practitioners—toward interventions that are informed, coordinated, and sustainable.

The framework draws on three intersecting traditions: (1) community organizing theory, which emphasizes relationship-building and the centrality of affected communities in setting agendas;¹ (2) human rights advocacy practice, which emphasizes legal literacy and institutional engagement; and (3) occupational health research on caregiving professions, which documents the psychological costs of sustained engagement with trauma-affected populations.²

2. Stage One: Knowledge Acquisition

Effective advocacy begins with an accurate understanding of the relevant legal, political, and social landscape. This includes familiarity with asylum and refugee status determination processes, immigration detention practices, and jurisdiction-specific policy, which varies substantially across national and subnational contexts. Advocates are encouraged to consult primary sources rather than relying solely on secondary media coverage, which may be incomplete or polarized.

This stage is particularly important given the documented prevalence of migration-related misinformation. Research indicates that misperceptions about migrant population size, welfare dependency, and crime rates are widespread and resistant to correction: even when corrective factual information is presented, audiences often reinterpret it in ways that preserve their prior policy attitudes, a pattern attributed to motivated reasoning.³ Distorted narratives about immigration have also been linked to public support for more restrictive enforcement policies,⁴ and misinformation circulating on social media can directly endanger migrants themselves, for example by exposing them to fraud during transit. Given this landscape, an advocate's credibility—and their capacity to avoid inadvertently amplifying false claims—depends substantially on the rigor of this initial research phase.

The consequences of this landscape extend well beyond public discourse. When the federal government proposed expanding “public charge” immigration reviews to include use of Medicaid, SNAP, and housing assistance, survey data collected during the proposal period found that roughly 1 in 7 adults in immigrant families reported that they or a family member avoided a public benefit program for fear it would jeopardize a future green card application — a rate that rose to about 1 in 5 among low-income immigrant families.⁵ These effects extended well beyond those directly subject to the rule: households in which every noncitizen member already held a green card, and households in which all foreign-born members were naturalized citizens, still reported meaningful rates of avoidance, as did households with children under 19 — the large majority of whom are U.S. citizens.⁵ Analysts projected that the resulting decline in program participation could affect millions of Medicaid/CHIP enrollees living with a noncitizen family member, with consequences for family financial stability

and child health and development.⁶ These findings illustrate that immigration policy operates on a scale wider than the individual migrant: it reshapes the daily decisions of spouses, children, and extended kin — many of them U.S. citizens — long before any enforcement action occurs.

Given this journal's focus, advocates working with Latine and Hispanic migrant communities face several language- and region-specific informational challenges. Spanish-language misinformation circulates disproportionately through encrypted, difficult-to-monitor channels, particularly WhatsApp, which is widely used by Latino immigrants to stay connected with family across borders.⁷ Content moderation research further suggests that Spanish-language misinformation on major platforms is identified and flagged at substantially lower rates than comparable English-language content, leaving Spanish-dominant audiences more exposed to unchecked claims about immigration enforcement, benefits eligibility, and legal process.⁸ Advocates should also avoid conflating “Latin American migrant” with “Spanish speaker”: U.S. Customs and Border Protection has been documented to assume that migrants from Spanish-speaking countries are themselves Spanish speakers, a practice that undercounts and misroutes Indigenous-language speakers — for example, speakers of Mam, K'iche', or Mixe from Guatemala and Oaxaca — into Spanish-language proceedings they may not fully understand.⁹ Accurate knowledge acquisition for this population therefore requires attention to both the language ecosystem migrants rely on for information and the linguistic diversity obscured by “Spanish-speaking” as a catch-all category.

3. Stage Two: Role Selection

Advocacy activities can be broadly categorized into four modalities:

- **Direct service provision:** interpretation and translation, legal-clinic support, tutoring, and material assistance.
- **Policy advocacy:** legislative engagement, public testimony, and campaigns for local or national policy change.
- **Public education:** writing, public speaking, and counter-messaging against misinformation.
- **Mutual aid:** fundraising, transportation assistance, and resource brokering.

Selecting a modality aligned with an advocate's existing skills, time availability, and comparative advantage increases the likelihood of sustained engagement, which is a stronger predictor of cumulative impact than the intensity of any single intervention.

4. Stage Three: Institutional Partnership

Rather than initiating independent efforts, advocates are generally better positioned to affiliate with existing organizations that possess established infrastructure and operational continuity. Community organizing distinguishes between organizing efforts built around a pre-set agenda (“mobilization”) and efforts that convene existing community organizations and leaders to collaboratively determine priorities (“relational organizing”); the latter approach is generally regarded as more likely to build durable community power.¹⁰ Staples defines community organizing as collective action that draws on participatory processes and indigenous leadership to reduce power disparities and achieve shared goals for social change—a definition that underscores why affiliation with community-rooted organizations, rather than independent action, is generally advisable for advocates.

The promotor(a) de salud, or community health worker, model offers a well-documented example of this principle applied specifically within Latine communities. Rather than positioning an outside professional as the primary point of contact, this model trains trusted peers from within the community itself to conduct outreach, health and resource navigation, and violence-prevention education.¹¹ Evaluations of promotora-led programs report high participant trust and engagement, attributed in part to the relationship of trust a community member can establish more quickly than a credentialed outsider.¹² Advocacy organizations seeking institutional partners in Latine communities may find community health worker networks a productive starting point, both as a partnership model and as a channel for the relational practice described in Stage Four.

5. Stage Four: Relational Practice

Where advocacy involves direct engagement with migrants, the framework emphasizes a relational rather than transactional orientation. Participatory Action Research (PAR) offers a methodological analogue: PAR treats the inclusion of affected individuals’ own perspectives as essential to producing an accurate and legitimate account of a community’s needs, rather than relying solely on outside researchers’ or advocates’ assumptions.¹³ Advocacy conducted in this spirit—prioritizing the stated priorities of affected communities—is distinguished from charity-oriented models, which risk reproducing hierarchical dynamics between benefactor and beneficiary.

6. Stage Five: Civic Engagement

Formal civic channels remain a significant lever for policy change. These include direct communication with elected representatives, participation in local governmental proceedings such as city council or school board meetings where migrant-relevant policy is frequently determined, and electoral participation informed by candidates' immigration positions.

7. Stage Six: Information Stewardship

Advocates bear a responsibility to circulate accurate, sourced information rather than emotionally persuasive but unverified claims. This is especially salient given that migration discourse is disproportionately shaped by simplified and emotionally charged narratives; a European Commission Joint Research Centre report notes that public discourse on migration tends to remain fixed on polarized framings and that negative emotional reactions, once triggered, are difficult to reverse through subsequent factual correction.¹⁴ This dynamic underscores the value of accurate personal narrative—shared with informed consent—as a complement to statistical argumentation.

8. Stage Seven: Resource Mobilization

Material support—particularly for legal representation—has a strong, empirically documented effect on case outcomes. A national study of over 1.2 million U.S. deportation cases found that having an attorney was associated with significantly better outcomes at every stage of proceedings, yet only 37 percent of immigrants in removal proceedings secured representation nationally.¹⁵ A subsequent randomized study of a universal representation program in Chicago immigration court found that access to counsel increased a detained person's likelihood of being granted relief from deportation by 366 percent and increased the likelihood of release on bond by 46 percent.¹⁶ These findings substantiate the recommendation that advocates direct financial contributions toward legal defense funds and emergency assistance funds for detained individuals and their families.

Within this stage, language access deserves particular attention for Latine migrants, given how frequently interpretation needs are assumed rather than assessed. Representation rates vary sharply by language: one analysis of asylum-seeker data found that Mandarin-speaking applicants had an attorney in 79 percent of cases, compared with 39 percent for speakers of Kekchí, an Indigenous Guatemalan language often misclassified as Spanish.¹⁷ Mismatched interpretation at intake can also produce inconsistencies between an applicant's initial interview and later court testimony, which immigration judges may read as a credibility problem rather than a translation

artifact.¹⁷ Advocates making legal referrals for Latin American migrants should confirm that a partner organization has verified Indigenous-language capacity, rather than assuming Spanish-language services are sufficient.

9. Stage Eight: Advocate Sustainability

Finally, the framework addresses advocate wellbeing. Sustained engagement in advocacy, particularly direct service involving trauma-exposed populations, carries a documented risk of secondary traumatic stress (STS) and burnout. A study of 210 refugee resettlement workers across six U.S. resettlement agencies found meaningful rates of STS and burnout, and identified emotional intelligence as a protective factor while certain coping strategies—including self-blame, substance use, and behavioral disengagement—were associated with worse outcomes.² Complementary research on humanitarian aid workers emphasizes that training, supervision, peer support, and stable work-life balance can mitigate these risks.¹⁸ Pacing, peer support, and role rotation are accordingly recommended practices for maintaining long-term advocacy capacity.

10. Discussion

This framework's sequential structure is heuristic rather than strictly linear; in practice, advocates often revisit earlier stages (e.g., ongoing knowledge acquisition) throughout their engagement. The framework's central claim is that advocacy effectiveness is a function of informed, coordinated, and sustainable practice rather than the volume or visibility of individual actions. Limitations of this framework include its generalized applicability across jurisdictions with substantially different legal and political contexts, its reliance on U.S.-centric legal-outcome data in Stage Seven, and its synthesis of literatures that were not originally designed to be integrated into a single applied model.

11. Conclusion

Migrant advocacy, to be effective, requires a deliberate balance of informed action, institutional coordination, and ethical self-awareness. The eight-stage framework presented here offers a structured starting point for individuals and organizations seeking to engage constructively with migrant communities, while cautioning against unreflective or paternalistic approaches that can undermine both practical outcomes and the dignity of those being served.

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