U.S. Human Rights Attorney Cynthia Hernandez

Team led by California attorney Cynthia Hernandez achieves remarkable success for Afghan refugees

Los Angeles, Calif. — After 76,000 Afghans were airlifted out of Kabul, Afghanistan, in August 2021, many of them needed legal assistance as they sought asylum in the United States.

The need was urgent for those who had risked their lives over two decades to support America's efforts to build the foundations of democracy in their native land. Had they remained in Afghanistan, the people who served as government officials, advisors, guides and translators for allied troops faced violent retribution by the Taliban. In the U.S., they had to confront the stress of having their temporarily approved legal status expire without a streamlined legal path forward.

Fortunately, a team of legal experts in Southern California assembled by veteran human rights attorney Cynthia Hernandez was ready to step forward to provide the help they needed.

The International Institute of Los Angeles (IILA), a social service agency that has aided immigrants for more than a century, appointed Hernandez to assist Afghans who had settled in the region with the IILA's support. In the course of seven months, Hernandez's team filed applications for 400 asylum seekers — a startling accomplishment in light of the country's convoluted and backlogged immigration system.

Under Hernandez's leadership, the IILA's Afghan Legal Representation Project (ALRP) — composed of three attorneys, one paralegal and four translators — worked tirelessly to ensure that the applications were submitted correctly and on time.

"With only 10 adjudications remaining, our record of approvals has been 100 percent," Hernandez said.

The ALRP's work continues as the unit assists with lawful permanent residency (green cards), work permits, humanitarian parole extensions and family reunification. "Our ultimate goal is to ensure our clients will enjoy permanent residency in the United States, where they and their families will be safe and out of the Taliban's reach," Hernandez said.

The team also created a mentoring program to empower Afghan women as they transition to the American lifestyle while preserving their traditional cultural connections. Its participants are learning how to build resumes, look for jobs, obtain driver's licenses and deal with domestic violence. The program is already expanding to other regions across the United States.

"Our clients range from advocates of women's rights to translators, security guards, journalists and high-ranking Afghan government officials," she continued. "We are honored to assist these allies who served with courage and distinction."