

Network boosts number of church-based legal clinics for immigrants

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

October 23, 2014

c. 2014 Religion News Service

WASHINGTON (RNS) An alliance of evangelical organizations has pledged to dramatically increase the number of church-based legal clinics across the country to assist immigrants with the complicated processes of seeking green cards, visas and family unification.

The Immigration Alliance, a network of 15 evangelical denominations and ministries, on Tuesday (October 21) launched a plan to reduce the gap between the 22 million immigrant noncitizens and the 12,000 private immigration lawyers in the country.

“Churches are a trusted presence in immigrant communities that can—and should—help address this critical shortage of legal services,” said Noel Castellanos, the alliance’s board chair and the CEO of the Christian Community Development Association, in announcing the new venture.

The alliance, which was formed in 2013, estimates that there also are 2,800 nonprofit attorneys and accredited staff in the country. The umbrella network includes the National Association of Evangelicals, the Assemblies of God, the Church of the Nazarene and the National Latino Evangelical Coalition, among others.

As President Obama considers executive action on immigration because of stalled action on Capitol Hill, alliance leaders hope to increase the number of clinics they have provided at churches from the current 29 to 1,000 by 2017. Each clinic must go through an accreditation process with the federal Board of Immigration Appeals before offering low-cost advice and help in preparing documents that can lead to legal status.

Zach Szmara, pastor of The Bridge Community Church in Logansport, Indiana, started a legal clinic in February and has assisted more than 100 clients. In one

case, he helped a parishioner from Mexico who was a victim of sexual assault obtain a U visa, which is given to crime victims who assist authorities with prosecutions. In another, he helped reunite a family with two children who had remained in El Salvador.

“It changes a life,” he said of clinics like his, noting that clients have sometimes traveled more than 100 miles to get assistance. “Where there was hopelessness and brokenness, there’s now hope.”

Roy Beck, executive director of NumbersUSA, which favors reducing immigration, said he hopes the alliance will “not take actions that encourage further disobedience of immigration laws that are designed to limit the flow of foreign workers in order to protect the ability of this nation’s vulnerable citizens to obtain jobs and earn livable wages.”

Szmara, whose church is affiliated with The Wesleyan Church, said he keeps the text of the Immigration and Nationality Act open on his desk as he does the clinic work.

“I can only work with that,” he said. “That’s the current law.”