

# Irish International Immigrant Center

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## **Irish International Immigrant Center -- Welcoming Dreamers, Immigrants, Refugees: our Neighbors**

The Irish International Immigrant Center (IIIC) in Boston, Massachusetts assists immigrant and refugee families from around the world as they integrate into American society. Founded nearly 30 years ago, we provide critical immigration legal services, in-depth counseling to those struggling with anxiety and depression, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), computer courses, and citizenship classes to low-income families in greater Boston. We advocate for policies for systemic change that impacts immigrants. And through community building events, we bring people together to learn about different cultures and each other.

The IIIC envisions a society where all people are welcomed and valued, and enjoy equal opportunities and protections. We promote this vision by supporting immigrant and refugee families holistically. We respond to their immediate needs and support their successful integration by providing this full range of services -- all under one roof -- a *Welcome Center* for the immigrant and refugee community.

The United States is -- and always has been -- a country of immigrants. Immigrants account for 28 of the population in Boston and 16 percent of the population across Massachusetts. To put these percentages into perspective, according to the American Immigration Council, "in 2015 Massachusetts was home to 539,003 women, 497,730 men, and 59, 220 children who were immigrants." It is imperative that newcomers receive the support that they need in order to successfully integrate, contribute to our communities, and thrive.

The journey of integration is not without its challenges, particularly as immigrants face unique economic, social, and legal barriers. Families struggle with adjusting to social differences and a new language, navigating the complex legal system, and finding meaningful employment. These challenges often result in families braving fears, stress, and anxieties, often in isolation.

The current political climate has intensified these barriers, and successfully integrating to life in the United States has never been more challenging. The upsurge in ICE raids and detentions, has generated much insecurity and instability, and promoted an inhospitable environment for immigrant families. The administration's executive orders and immigration policies have severely impacted thousands of immigrants in Massachusetts. For example: the threat to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program which provides protections to more than 800,000 who were brought to the U.S. as children, and

Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which provides humanitarian relief for hundreds of thousands of immigrants from countries impacted by natural disaster or political unrest.

It can be a tremendous challenge for low-income immigrants to access all of the services that they need while trying to achieve basic security and stability for their families.

The IIC responds to these challenges by offering a *Welcome Center* that provides a range of support that low-income immigrant families need, in a safe and comfortable environment. Our service model includes a fully integrated approach to supporting families, with attorneys, social workers, and educators working collaboratively to provide the assistance that families need on their journey towards security and stability. A family can come to the IIC for legal consultation and representation, to learn English or computer skills required for the workforce, for mental health support, and to have their voice heard and stories told.

Within this approach, services are integrated, and staff assess situations on a holistic level. The *Welcome Center* service model is relational rather than transactional. For example, a Spanish-speaking social worker will accompany a Central American mother on a doctor's appointment; an attorney offers free legal representation to a homeless immigrant student seeking legal status and

facilitates a “know-your-rights” workshop at the local school; and instructors develop partnerships with academic or vocational programs to promote greater economic opportunity for their students.

Simultaneously, our internal services are integrated, so that an attorney can call upon a social worker in a crisis situation, an ESOL instructor can refer a student to an attorney for legal guidance, and a social worker can refer a client to ESOL classes if language is a particular stressor. Staff thoroughly engage with families, building relationships, trust, and community.

This relational approach is critical, particularly in a time when immigrant and refugee families feel isolated because of the political climate and are uncertain about their future and about who they are able to trust.

Attending a legal clinic or requesting a wellness consultation can be daunting. Providing a safe space for immigrant and refugee families makes it easier. The impact of this approach is that the IIC is able to work with families as *partners* on a journey towards stability, fulfillment, and empowerment.

A former client of the IIC, Noon Elhassan, demonstrates the impact of our approach and the importance of a *Welcome Center*. Noon and her family fled Sudan when it became too unsafe for them to stay, and they sought the legal, wellness, and education services of the IIC to start over. Noon’s family needed to obtain permanent resident

status (green cards) so they could work and study in the country, and through this achieve security. IIC's immigration attorneys helped them throughout this process, and within a year Noon had received her green card. The IIC's citizenship services also assisted Noon's mother in becoming a U.S. citizen. Noon hopes to follow in the footsteps of her mother and soon become a citizen. Today, Noon is a Biology major at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Noon is training to become a medical professional, aspiring to beneficially impact the Greater Boston community through her experience, knowledge, and skills. The IIC recently presented Noon with the Solas Courage Award at their annual fundraising gala in order to recognize her courage, resilience, and determination. Noon continues to participate in the IIC community, giving back to others by sharing her story and encouraging hope in newcomers who walk through the Center's door.

2017 was a year of growth at the IIC and the vibrancy is palpable. Today, a visitor on a Monday or Wednesday night would see four different classrooms full of engaged students learning English from enthusiastic teachers. Every other Tuesday, dozens of families converge at our center and receive free advice from our staff and pro bono attorneys about immigration issues impacting their lives. And on-going counseling from our social worker help people struggling with substance abuse or mental health challenges to build healthier lives.

All of them are greeted with the word "Welcome" in 30 different languages. Moving forward, creating a space that is warm and inviting will be our priority. Following our three-year strategic plan, we will continue to improve upon our service integration to ensure that families take advantage of our full range of services here at the IIC. You can learn more about our work at [www.iicenter.org](http://www.iicenter.org), or by visiting us at One State Street in Boston. It will do your heart good to see the dedication, courage, and hope shared by staff and guests alike.

## **Works Cited**

Immigrants in Massachusetts." American Immigration Council. October 26, 2017. Accessed October 27, 2017. [Link](#).