

# Hispanic Affairs Project nabs key accreditation

Nonprofit organization is first on Western Slope with certification

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By Katharhynn Heidelberg Daily Press Senior Writer | 0 comments

The Hispanic Affairs Project is now able to offer accredited assistance for families with their immigration petitions. The accreditation, through the Department of Justice's Board of Immigration Appeals, or BIA, helps immigrants who can't afford legal fees to receive qualified representation with their applications.

"It's very important for us, because on the entire Western Slope, there are no such services (from non-attorneys)," said Ricardo Perez, the nonprofit's executive director.

"HAP is becoming the first organization on the entire Western Slope of Colorado in receiving this approval from the Department of Justice. We are committed to doing our best, serving our community, representing individuals and families, especially low-income families."

Two part-time Hispanic Affairs Project employees, Marketa Zubkova and Nicole Bernal Ruiz, were approved for accreditation after receiving two years of legal training. The women began offering assistance earlier this month. They are accredited representatives, but not attorneys.

"We are very excited about this," said Zubkova, of Crested Butte. "We are accredited, which means we can help people with their immigration cases. We can help them to fill out the forms, give them legal advice, collect all the supporting documents and officially represent them before the USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services)."

## Immigration process

The Hispanic Affairs Project serves Montrose, Mesa, Delta, Gunnison, San Miguel and Ouray counties. People are screened to determine what assistance they might receive. If an accredited representative can't help them, the prospective clients are referred to American Immigration Lawyers Association attorneys.

"We will be focusing on low-income families who cannot afford immigration attorneys," Zubkova said.

"Our priority is low-income families and especially the migrant farmworkers," Perez said.

Qualified professionals are important to the immigration petition process, he said. Families who cannot afford an attorney will often turn to a "notario," or "notary," on the belief that notaries function the same way in the U.S. as they do in South America.

But that is not the case, Perez said.

"This is a very complicated situation, because the notaries in the U.S. are not accredited to represent individuals and families," he said. "We know of a lot of cases where undocumented people messed up the application because the individuals providing these services were not prepared to do it in the right way."

The application forms are costly; families can spend up to \$1,000 on a single application, and that doesn't even take into account legal fees, Perez said. In this environment, the "notarios" have flourished, he indicated.

"Our accreditation could help people get good, legal advice."

## Trusted organization

The Hispanic Affairs Project's accredited immigration legal assistance program is a milestone achievement, the organization indicated. The DOJ sent word on April 15, approving the application HAP made only 45 days earlier. Perez said no one had expected a decision before 120 days.

"This program will help many families to save money and receive trustworthy help with their petitions," HAP leader and past board member Joel Flores said in a news release.

“It will keep many families together. People often wait to file petitions because they cannot afford the expensive legal and application fees, and things happen while they wait to save the money. The families end up being separated.” The accredited immigration legal assistance program offers help through a known and trusted community organization, Flores said.

The Hispanic Affairs Project was eyeing helping potentially hundreds of people with family-based immigration processes that include citizenship and adjustment of status, if the president’s Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents, or DAPA, was upheld.

On Monday, however, the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals denied the Administration’s request to stay an injunction that was put in place while states challenge DAPA. The lower court injunction will stand, according to published reports. The ruling means that implementation of the new DAPA and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals-Plus programs remain blocked, pending further appeals, according to the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition.

## **Various programs**

The Hispanic Affairs Project’s Board of Immigration Appeals accreditation remains in effect to provide assistance with immigration petitions. The 5th Circuit ruling is in some ways affecting the number of people the program serves, because HAP had anticipated helping more individuals, Perez said.

“With BIA we are already helping new DACA candidates or DACA renewals; also U.S. citizenship, residency adjustment, work permits and other kinds of immigration adjustment,” Perez said.

More fundraising is being undertaken. “We have the program, but we don’t have enough financial support to run the program like we want to do it,” Perez said.

The nonprofit’s primary goal is to support immigrants and refugees so that they can fully integrate. Other programs include: migrant outreach, combating human trafficking, the Welcoming Colorado Initiative, leadership development and community organizing; supporting pro-immigrant policies and a community resource center.

Zubkova and Bernal Ruiz’s services are based out of HAP’s Montrose office, 300 N. Cascade Ave., Suite C-4, and out of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church in Grand Junction, 790 26.5 Road.

Information about how to make tax-deductible donations to HAP can be found at [www.hapgj.org](http://www.hapgj.org).

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