



Legal Services Center Policy Dispatch Summer 2021



Photo of SIJS poster displayed on a LinkNYC screen in New York City.

A MESSAGE FROM OUR SUMMER POLICY TEAM

Since The Door launched the [End SIJS Backlog Coalition](#) in February, more than 70 allied organizations across the country have signed on as partners, working to educate Congress, immigration agencies, and the public about the harmful impacts of the backlog for immigrant children and to advocate for ending it.

As a reminder, Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJS) is a congressionally created humanitarian protection for immigrant children who have been abused, abandoned, or neglected by their parents. However, a legal oversight categorizes the SIJS green card application process as “employment-based,” which has resulted in many children who qualify for the status being unable to seek permanent residency for years rather than months. This extended waiting period, or backlog, has left [tens of thousands of children](#) with approved SIJS vulnerable to deportation and without access to work authorization and other resources necessary for permanency and stability.

The Coalition is currently working to end the SIJS backlog by engaging in both administrative and legislative advocacy. Through this advocacy, the Coalition aims to center the voices of SIJS backlog impacted youth and keep their experiences at the forefront of the conversation. In this dispatch, we are excited to highlight some of the work our policy team is leading to end the SIJS backlog!

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[Administrative Advocacy](#)

On May 20, the Coalition submitted a [letter](#) to senior immigration officials proposing concrete steps that immigration agencies can take to restore the protective purpose of SIJS and to mitigate the worst harms of the SIJS backlog. Signed by over 400 organizationa and individuals, the letter emphasizes that immigration agencies have discretionary authority to implement protections against deportation for SIJS youth subject to the backlog and to grant them employment authorization. You can read the [press release](#) here.

On August 18, The Door, represented by Milbank LLP, filed a [lawsuit](#) against the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) seeking expedited processing of a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for agency data on SIJS adjudications and applications. We have been receiving request after request for information on the numbers of youth in the SIJS backlog from members of Congress in our advocacy to amend the INA. The government's failure to provide us this data is hindering prospects of ending the backlog this Congress. [Read the press release here!](#)

Legislative Advocacy

MAJOR WIN! Thanks to our legislative advocacy efforts, the first draft of the Fiscal Year 2022 Homeland Security Subcommittee [Appropriations Bill](#) includes specific language that **no federal funds may be used for the detention or removal of any individual who has a demonstrated eligibility for SIJS**. This restrictive funding language is a direct result of the advocacy of the Coalition's [SIJS Summer School](#), a new initiative to educate Congress about the severe harms of the SIJS green card backlog on immigrant youths. As part of this effort, our members across the country have attended 23 meetings with their representatives in Congress, and more meetings are planned for the coming weeks.

While we are excited about the inclusion of this language, we also realize that this is not a permanent solution and that it does not directly remedy the green card backlog. As a result, we continue to advocate for the inclusion of amendments to the INA into relevant legislation.

The Coalition recognizes that young people who are directly impacted by the backlog should have the opportunity to guide this work. For this reason, The Door hired two young people who were directly impacted by the SIJS backlog to support and guide our legislative advocacy efforts. Along with another member of The Door, these young people planned an advocacy and storytelling training for other interested youths from across the country, which took place on August 4. Their goal for this training was to empower other young people who were or are currently impacted by the backlog to use their voice, share their experiences, and speak out about the harmful effects of the backlog.

In the News

Coalition members have also been busy publishing op-eds and participating in media outreach to educate the public about the harmful impacts of the green card backlog and to advocate for legislative and administrative solutions.

Lauren Aronson, Director of the Immigration Law Clinic at The University of Illinois and a Coalition Steering Committee member, was [interviewed](#) by the Illinois News Bureau, where she clarified the legislative intent behind SIJS as a child welfare mechanism and called on Congress to amend the INA to end the backlog.

Rekha Sharma-Crawford, Kansas City immigration attorney and Coalition member, published an [opinion piece](#) in Ms. Magazine arguing that, by deporting SIJS applicants in the backlog, the Department of Homeland Security is undermining the core purpose of the SIJS Program. [Crux](#) and [Documented](#) both recently reported on the Coalition's administrative advocacy efforts and explained the legal cause of the backlog and the adverse impacts that years of legal limbo have on vulnerable children.

Our managing attorney, Rachel Davidson, was interviewed in a NACLA [article](#) about the long periods of legal limbo for young people stuck in the backlog, the psychological impacts that these wait times have, and the Coalition's proposed legislative solutions.

Most recently, Lauren Aronson, Theo Liebmann, and Andrea Ramos, members of the Coalition's academic advocacy working group and steering committee, published an [op-ed](#) in Slate detailing the minor amendments to the INA that could exempt SIJS beneficiaries from visa limitations and thus resolve the SIJS green card backlog.

Advocacy Highlight



Photo of SIJS posters and pamphlets at The Door and MOIA joint press conference.

Making Policy Public SIJS Campaign

The Door has also been engaging in community outreach to spread awareness about SIJS to young people who might be eligible. Understanding that knowledge is power, The Door partnered with the Center for Urban Pedagogy's (CUP) Making Policy Public project, designer Grace Han, and the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs to launch a public information [campaign](#). The campaign included informational graphics that were displayed on LinkNYC screens throughout the five boroughs during the month of July. Additionally, we are distributing printed pamphlets, posting fold-out posters, and sharing [social media resources](#), all with information about SIJS and details about how eligible young people can connect with a legal services organization. Young people from The Door were directly involved in the process of developing the language, graphics, and layout of these pamphlets and posters through participation in multiple focus groups during the past year.

On July 15, The Door held a [joint press conference](#) with the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA) outside of 555 Broome Street to celebrate the launch of the campaign. A young person involved in the process spoke about the importance of sharing information with the community, and representatives from The Door, MOIA, and CUP also spoke about the campaign and efforts to make information about SIJS more accessible.

MEET OUR SUMMER POLICY TEAM:

This summer, The Door's policy team has grown to five passionate individuals committed to ending the SIJS backlog and spreading information about SIJS to eligible youth: Ivonne Silva, Maria Huerta Rodriguez, Noga Shlapobersky, and Daniela Czemerinski joined Rachel Davidson from June to August.

Ivonne and Maria have been busy planning and developing the advocacy and storytelling workshop for young people to become SIJS Advocates. Earlier this summer, they both also collected oral testimony from other young people who are currently impacted by the SIJS green card backlog. These interviews will be highlighted in a report that documents the impacts of the backlog from multiple perspectives, including the harms felt by young people, legal service providers, and child welfare agencies.

Noga, an undergraduate student at Barnard College, has been focused on legislative advocacy, coordinating congressional meetings, and developing strategies for contacting relevant legislators about our legislative agenda. Noga helped organize a training for Coalition members interested in participating in SIJS Summer School, and she has been pivotal in matching members with their representatives to begin educating them about the harms of backlog.

Daniela, a legal intern from NYU Law, has been focused on legislative research, ensuring that our legislative agenda is robust and feasible. She helped youth leaders prepare for the storytelling training on August 4 and attended multiple meetings with legislators during SIJS Summer School. Daniela has been supporting other advocacy efforts, too, by conducting interviews with legal service providers and child welfare agencies to be included in the upcoming report documenting the impacts of the SIJS backlog.



Stand With The Door

The Door is a non-profit youth development organization in New York City serving people ages 12-24. Your donation helps support our many programs and nearly 11,000 young people we see each year.

A copy of our most recently filed financial report is available from the Charities Registry on the New York State Attorney General's website (www.charitiesnys.com) or, upon request, by contacting the New York State Attorney General, Charities Bureau, 28 Liberty Street, New York, NY 10005, or us at 555 Broome Street, New York, NY 10013. You also may obtain information on charitable organizations from the New York State Office of the Attorney General at www.charitiesnys.com or (212) 416-8401.

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