In a Points of View article last year, e-Volunteerism focused on volunteers at the front lines of the refugee crisis in Europe. The article showed how volunteers’ impassioned scramble to help in a humanitarian crisis—though often inefficient and always insufficient—nonetheless addresses real needs and sends a message to governments to act. Orange-vested volunteers pulling refugees from boats and greeting them with blankets on Mediterranean shores are becoming emblematic of civic engagement with migrant rights, but they are just a fraction of the diverse volunteer sector that serves the needs of immigrants and refugees worldwide.

Borders and shores are only the beginning of the journey. While some immigrants' first steps inside a country are more perilous than others—a three-day trek through the desert, a rescue from a sinking boat, a release from a trafficker's over-packed vehicle—even immigrants arriving safely at an airport are still plunged into uncertainty and vulnerability. Settling into life in a new country can be a more daunting journey than getting to the country in the first place.

Foreign-born people make up an increasing portion of U.S. and European populations, rising from 4% in 1970 to 13.3% in 2014 in the U.S. and growing substantially across Europe in recent years. Volunteers have always provided welcoming services to immigrants, but the influx of refugees now has become an everyday concern for many organizations. For some volunteers and organizations, this shift has been inadvertent: a soup kitchen or food pantry has an increasingly foreign-born clientele, a faith institution adapts to its changing community, an education organization increasingly serves immigrant youth. At the same time, a corps of volunteers has emerged to address the particular needs of immigrant and refugee communities. This Voices article will focus on the latter category, specifically in the U.S.

Notably, many volunteers working with immigrants or refugees are either immigrants or refugees themselves. These volunteers deserve special recognition for channeling their own hardships to serve others suffering in a similar manner. While this article does not focus on foreign-born volunteers, it is worth bearing in mind that these individuals are seminal to all volunteer efforts described.
Emergency Assistance for Recent Arrivals

Much contemporary volunteer activity in the U.S. that serves immigrants and refugees can be traced to the “Sanctuary Movement” of the 1980s. As hundreds of thousands fleeing Central American civil wars were denied asylum by the Reagan administration [6], volunteers from faith communities, the legal field, and refugee communities provided shelter, services, and pro bono representation to these politically homeless people. Three decades later, America has an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants (even with deporting nearly 400,000 annually), and new waves of refugees arriving. Today there is even more robust volunteer action serving these unrecognized or unwelcome immigrants.

Casa Marianella [7] in Austin, Texas, has bridged the Sanctuary Movement with contemporary volunteer efforts on the “front lines” of immigration to the U.S., offering a snapshot of how volunteers can serve the immediate needs of new arrivals. Since 1986, this “volunteer-driven emergency homeless shelter” has provided safe haven and resources for immigrants and refugees from around the world. Most important, it has kept people from detention while awaiting the disposition of their cases. Its list of volunteer opportunities [8] captures the diversity of ways that volunteers can engage with immigrants and refugees:

- **Resident Mentors** “…introduce recently-arrived asylees and immigrants to both the city of Austin and the quirks and norms of US culture.”
- **Appointment Advocates** “…drive residents to their appointments and help to make sure that they have understood all of the needed information and they have communicated their needs.”
- **Food Shift [Volunteers]** “…help cook dinner for the house (30+ people) with Casa staff and residents. Afterwards, you are invited to sit down and eat dinner with residents!”
- **ESL Teachers** “…prepare and present their own interactive, practical lessons to one evening class a week…and therefore commit to teaching once a week for ten weeks.”

These volunteer efforts reflect the reality of many recent immigrants: unfamiliar with U.S. language and culture, they must navigate a complex legal process while also tending to food and housing needs. Casa Marianella’s multi-pronged volunteer efforts highlight and address the overlapping challenges of arriving in the country.

The program has done a great job of presenting itself to the public, especially with a section of their web site called “Resident Stories” [9].” Browse through to hear the voices of both immigrants and the volunteers who help them.

At the Homeless I.D. Project [10] in Phoenix, AZ, volunteers help homeless people, including immigrants, retrieve lost identification and fill out necessary paperwork to apply for citizenship. As they explain:

*Homeless ID Project is the only organization in Arizona with its sole mission to help men, women, and children experiencing homelessness to rebuild their lives by obtaining their identification. We are focused and committed to reducing barriers to accessing employment, housing, and social services.*

*In 2015 alone, we provided over 10,000 services to 5,346 people experiencing homelessness. We are the only organization in the country to exclusively provide daily identification services.*

The Homeless I.D. Project also has a section on their site worth reading: “Success Stories [11].”
Pro Bono Guidance through a Legal Labyrinth

Immigrants’ unique legal challenges begin as soon as they arrive in the U.S. and can stretch on for years or decades. While a strong public service legal field has emerged serving low-income immigrants and refugees, much legal relief for immigrants still comes from volunteer lawyers and pro bono service from private firms, applying the laws protecting refugees on the national and state levels.

New arrivals can get volunteer legal assistance for their asylum application proceedings, Special Immigrant Juvenile Status claims, cancellations of removal, and representation in immigrant detention. In a 2009 speech, “Deepening the Legal Profession’s Pro Bono Commitment to the Immigrant Poor,” Justice Robert Katzmann of the U.S. Court of Appeals said:

*Only forty percent of indigent immigrants have legal representation, while studies show that immigrants with legal representation have a significantly better chance of securing relief than those without...When the legal profession engages in such activity, we honor the memory of our ancestors who came to these shores to realize the American dream.*

Lawyers and legal volunteers also assist immigrants with adjustment of status, deferred action, naturalization, and immigration options that require at least several years of residency. Strong volunteer efforts have developed supporting naturalization. Organizations like NALEO Educational Fund (a group that “facilitates full Latino participation in the American political process, from citizenship to public service”) and the CUNY Citizenship Now! Volunteer Corps (“a growing community of New Yorkers from all backgrounds who are passionate about immigrants’ rights, immigration law, and public service”) leverage non-lawyer volunteers to help legal permanent residents apply for citizenship. These volunteers “get to have detailed conversations with the applicant and sometimes form a nice yet short relationship,” says Yamilka Mena, Northeast Program Manager for Civic Engagement at NALEO Education Fund. “Because of the time-consuming application, applicants are able to build rapport with the volunteers and feel more comfortable divulging private information.”

Ewins Julien, a Haitian immigrant featured as Citizenship Now!’s Volunteer of the Month, has volunteered at over 20 application assistance events. "I enjoy meeting others and helping people achieve their dreams!," he says. "It brings joy to my heart to make others happy. I am thankful that CUNY Citizenship Now!’s events help people save money and time.”

Volunteers have become critical to many large-scale naturalization efforts, but there are challenges, Mena says:

*The biggest challenge that we have faced is language barriers. Most of the applicants that come to our events are Latinos who speak predominantly Spanish. Most of our volunteers speak predominantly English. My job is to recruit as many Spanish speaking volunteers as possible. When that doesn’t work we use other tools that can help our volunteers and applicants communicate.*

Teaching English as a Second Language (and a Survival Skill)

Many organizations that serve immigrants and refugees offer English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, an initiative where volunteers are critical. This has become perhaps the most common method of volunteer engagement with immigrants and refugees for several reasons:
The need for ESL instruction is widespread across immigrants and refugees of different nationalities, statuses, incomes, and education levels. Immigrants wishing to naturalize must take an English proficiency exam, so this is a necessary skill. (Similarly, other volunteers help immigrants and refugees prepare for the civics exam [17], another naturalization requirement.) No foreign language proficiency is required of the volunteer. Volunteer-led ESL classes are an excellent forum for intercultural exchange and friendship.

This helps explain why volunteer opportunities for ESL teachers, tutors, and conversation partners can be found in so many places. Try searching under the keywords “immigrants” or “refugees” in VolunteerMatch [18] in any state.

The Voting Booth at Journey’s End

Voting is a right reserved for U.S. citizens, and some immigrants become citizens for the express purpose of casting their ballot. Organizations like the NALEO Educational Fund [19] leverage volunteers to mobilize the immigrant electorate. “Volunteers are the pillars of our work. They are the ones that help us fulfill our mission to ‘help facilitate full Latino participation,’” says NALEO's Mena.

Around the country, organizations that serve immigrants make thousands of phone calls on the days leading up to elections, telling new citizens to get out and vote. For many, it will be their first time doing so. It is a long journey from the border to the ballot, and those who have made it may think of the volunteers who helped them along the way.

Ed. Note: This article was written before the Presidential election in the United States. The topic is now both timely and politically contentious. We will continue to monitor volunteer action in support of refugees and immigrants as well as new forms of activism that might arise in this arena.