

Karin Anderson Ponzer, Esq., Ph.D.
Director, Neighbors Link Law Practice

Issue and Case for Change

Karin Anderson Ponzer is motivated by her steadfast belief that everyone deserves equal access to high-quality, compassionate legal representation and accurate legal information. Her interest and expertise in immigration law have led her to be a force for change in providing free legal services for low-income immigrants in Westchester, especially for those facing deportation. A 2018 study showed that undetained asylum-seeking immigrants without a lawyer prevailed in only 13% of their cases, while those with a lawyer prevailed in 74% of their cases. (U.S. Court of Appeals Chief Judge Robert A. Katzmann, Study Group on Immigrant Representation: The First Decade, 87 Fordham L. Rev. 485) The Marshall Project reports that the provision of free legal services has meant better outcomes for New York's new Americans than those elsewhere in the country. They are significantly more likely to be represented in court, and less likely to get deported. (Source: <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2018/07/23/new-york-on-ice>) Further, when immigrants turn to unqualified providers or simply do not get the legal services they need, they can end up in danger of detention or devastating deportation which tears apart families. Karin has brought these issues to the forefront in the legal community across Westchester County by providing professional education and fiercely advocating for a bigger funding pie for all organizations that provide free legal representation. With over 25% of the Westchester population being foreign-born – and approximately half of those undocumented – Karin's devotion to positive change in immigration law has positively impacted thousands of lives.

Awareness

In providing immigration legal services for recent arrivals to Westchester County, the Neighbors Link Community Law Practice (NLCLP) staff members must ask clients to share extremely personal stories that almost always involve traumatic experiences. As a result, clients are re-traumatized and staff members often experience secondary trauma from hearing the details and feel terribly about asking the clients to relay these difficult stories. Karin has taken on this issue, raising its importance throughout the Neighbors Link organization and in the wider community. She co-authored an article with her NLCLP colleagues which aims to help group psychotherapists gain greater awareness of their immigrant patients' experiences through an analysis of immigration law and the use of case studies. (Karin Anderson Ponzer, Elizabeth Mastropolo & Leslie Stephanie Molina (2020) Immigration Law and Its Impact on the Family: What Group Therapists Need to Know, International Journal of Group Psychotherapy.) Additionally, Karin dedicates time, energy, and resources to developing partnerships that can provide culturally appropriate mental health services for clients, as well as bringing in training and support for the NLCLP staff to manage secondary trauma. By addressing both sides of this issue, Karin aims to provide compassionate legal services and help staff do their best for their clients.

Collaboration

The gap between the need and availability of free immigration legal services is an issue around which Karin rallies many stakeholders to inspire collaboration in service delivery, especially in the legal community. Karin's deep knowledge of, and passion for, the legal needs of the immigrant community positions her as a widely sought-after expert. She frequently fields questions about immigration law and policy from community-based immigrant service providers, school districts, health care providers, police departments, religious leaders, media outlets, and various community members. By serving on various legal community committees, Karin brings together stakeholders to learn and collaborate. These include: chairing the Westchester Women's Bar Association Immigration Committee; the steering committee of the Immigration Advocates Resource Collaborative (I-ARC), and the conference committee for the 9th judicial district Immigrant Rights and Services Sub-committee's "Access to Justice" conference. In addition, Karin plays a leadership role on the Westchester County Steering Committee of the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC). Karin has also increased the visibility of NLCLP itself through successful applications and fulfillment of several contracts with the NYS Office for New Americans to serve as legal counsel for other service providers, as well as providing naturalization services. These contracts require NLCLP to collaborate heavily with a wide network of immigrant-serving providers and other legal organizations throughout the Hudson Valley.

Disruptive Innovation

Like most immigration attorneys, Karin is tremendously committed to providing high quality legal representation in a way that preserves dignity and respect for each client. But when people speak about Karin and her work, they use words like, "big visionary," "creative," and "no ego." Karin's work over the past 25 years in the immigration legal field has focused on doing everything possible to close the gap between the need and available resources for free representation. Especially since joining the work in Westchester County, Karin has creatively found ways to serve as many clients as possible throughout the entire system. She works to train new attorneys, increase the funding pie for all agencies involved in this work, maximize the support of paralegals and volunteers, partner with for-profit law firms, and increase the Neighbors Link Community Law Practice by adding staff as much as practicable. Five years ago, when Pace University decided that they could no longer support the Pace Community Law Practice, Karin saw an opportunity to create what she believed was the best approach to increasing the availability of free immigration legal services – by building a nonprofit immigration law practice. Since she merged the law practice into Neighbors Link, she has grown it from just two attorneys to seven attorneys, five paralegals, and one legal liaison. Karin not only added legal services to Neighbors Link's array of programming but integrated it in a holistic way that provides legal clients with critical supports to help them thrive in their new communities.