



# NEWSLETTER

## Boletín Informativo

LATIN AMERICAN LEGAL DEFENSE & EDUCATION FUND | Summer 2024



### 'Ambassadorship' was the message of the day at our recent 20th Anniversary Legislative Breakfast!

Mercer County Prosecutor Angelo Onofri was honored to receive a Team LALDEF shirt from Executive Director Cecy Jiménez-Weeast after delivering the keynote address.

[Read more on page 4](#)

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*Our mission: To promote the rights of all immigrants, to connect people with legal representation, to facilitate access to health care and education, to advocate for the integration of immigrants, and to foster intercultural communication to strengthen our communities.*



L to R: Pete Taft, Board Chair;  
Cecy Jiménez-Weeast Executive Director;  
Sasa Olessi Montaña, President

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FUTURO Coordinator

## From Our Leadership

**This year LALDEF marks an extraordinary achievement; 20 years of service to the Mercer County community!**

Our mission could not be more relevant than it is today; LALDEF promotes the rights of all immigrants; facilitates access to health care, education and legal representation; advocates for the integration of immigrants; and fosters inter-cultural communication to strengthen our communities.

We operate through our values of support, education, and justice.

The last part of our mission drives the work we do on a daily basis, one that it is grounded in our value system.

Everyone who crosses the threshold of La Casa de Bienvenida (Welcome House) is treated with dignity and respect.

We are a country of immigrants. While the immigration discussion sparks many divergent opinions, everyone can agree that those who are here, contributing to our communities in so many ways, are only looking for the same things our immigrant ancestors did; to provide for their families and to contribute to their community. These immigrants recognize LALDEF as a vehicle to becoming fully documented, American citizens.

We do this in so many ways! Our hallmark Legal Services Program does the work of helping immigrants through the citizenship process and all the documentation needed to achieve their ultimate goal of citizenship. This includes informing them of their legal rights to avoid exploitation that hurts everyone. Our extremely popular ID Card program, recognized by Mercer County Officials and government, provides immigrants with a valid ID as they move through the process of acquiring citizenship. Our ESL classes help them learn to communicate in the English language. Our FUTURO program supports first generation immigrant children on their journey through the educational system so they may succeed, and they are! We support immigrant women with basic skill sets through the Latinas Unidas program. In short, we make sure immigrants are prepared to become contributing community members by equipping them with all they may need, including a job search program when they have achieved their working permits.

**LALDEF is a multifaceted agency dedicated to all immigrants looking for a better life and to make a positive difference. We are so proud to have been part of this landscape for our first 20 years, and look forward to providing our valuable services for many years to come.**

Sincerely,

**Sasa Olessi Montaña,**  
President of the Board



## Outreach & Advocacy

The Outreach department’s main function consists of three services:

- **Issuing Mercer County Community Identification Cards (MCCIDs)**, which allows the cardholder to be able to receive direct services such as medical assistance, shelter, food, utility assistance, back rent assistance, and opening a bank account;
- **Facilitating access to health care**; an effort which has provided clients access to COVID-19 and influenza vaccinations, free eye exams and eyeglass wear, free mammograms
- **Advocacy services** such as translations, notarizations and one-on-one assistance/technological access assistance when applying to social services.



## FUTURO

LALDEF’s **FUTURO** Program is an inclusive, high-impact college mentoring program based in Trenton and Princeton. It provides promising first- and second-generation immigrant high school students in the greater Mercer County area with opportunities for personal, academic, professional, and wellness development. In addition to the **FUTURO** program, there’s also **FUTURO FAMILIA**, which addresses the holistic needs of families and provides a forum for parents and caretakers of **FUTURO** students.

The impact of the **FUTURO** program continues to support high-achieving high school students. In the Summer of 2024, 13 **FUTURO** seniors graduated from their respective high schools. They have all committed to higher education institutions and have been awarded merit-based scholarships from colleges they will attend this Fall, 2024.

*In their own words...*

“FUTURO has prepared me for college applications, life as a college student, and my future career goals. The program coordinator was actively involved and interested in my academic and personal goals, giving me the support I needed to transition into the next chapter of my life. It weren’t for FUTURO, my journey wouldn’t have been the same, so I am very grateful for the experience I have had with LALDEF and FUTURO.”

--Alan C. Graduating Senior  
FUTURO Class of 2024

“I am so grateful that my daughter made many changes in her student life. She became more interested in getting better grades and doing her best to qualify for universities. Thanks to you she is prepared and today hearing that from 8 universities she was already accepted in 6.”

--Ninennete S, a parent of a  
graduating senior from  
the FUTURO Class of 2024



**LEGISLATIVE BREAKFAST**  
**LEARNING FROM LALDEF'S 20 YEARS OF SERVICE**

**MAY 15 2024** | **8:00 AM - 10:00 AM**  
**TRENTON COUNTRY CLUB**  
**201 SULLIVAN WAY, WEST TRENTON, NJ**

Join Board Chair **Pete Taft** and Executive Director **Cecilia Jiménez-Weeast** for a Continental Breakfast to mark a milestone: LALDEF's 20 years of shared success.

**Pete Taft**, Board Chair | **Cecilia Jiménez-Weeast**, Executive Director | **Angelo Onofri**, Mercer County Prosecutor, Keynote Speaker

Learn about the mission of **Latin American Legal Defense and Education Fund** and hear its message to everyone who is navigating this challenging time in America.

To promote the rights of all immigrants, to connect people with legal representation, to facilitate access to health care and education, to advocate for the integration of immigrants, and to foster intercultural communication to strengthen our communities.

[www.laldef.org](http://www.laldef.org)

**Working together moves this work forward.**




## 20th Anniversary Breakfast

Trenton Mayor Reed Gusciora welcomed Mercer County Prosecutor Angelo Onofri and more than 80 guests to Trenton Country Club to listen to LALDEF's 20th Anniversary message to the communities it serves.



Visit our website to read more and view our event photo album.  
[laldef.org/anniversary-event](http://laldef.org/anniversary-event)







*In their own words...*

"I am from Guatemala. I moved to the United States in July 2023.

My family lives in Guatemala.

What brings me to LALDEF is to attend ESL classes and learn English. I started with Level 1 and I am currently finishing Level 3. My experience at LALDEF has been incredible, my English has improved tremendously. My communication skills are better and the way I express myself. LALDEF made me feel welcome and treated me and others with respect and gave us the same opportunities. I would like to thank the people that donate and contribute to LALDEF, thank you for the opportunity that you give to immigrants like myself that want to learn English."

--Alejandra Ovalle, ESL Student

"I am Dominican, and I arrived in 2017, I have been in the United States for 6 years. After 5 years

I found out that I could obtain citizenship. I spoke basic English so I encouraged myself to... take the Citizenship Test...but I had uncertainty and I needed the confidence to obtain citizenship. Shelly helped me with documents, told me that she could go to the interview with me, and actually accompanied me on the day of my interview. This gave me a lot of confidence as she sat with me and gave me tips, helping me pass the naturalization test and become a citizen!"

--LALDEF Legal Services Client



## Adult Education

LALDEF Adult Education Program consists of three main class categories: **ESL**, **U.S. Citizenship Prep**, and **High School Equivalency (GED)**.

Our ESL program provides students with significant resources to improve their English skills and knowledge and gives them a foundation for self-sufficiency in their lives in the United States. Our Adult Education collaborates with Legal Services to provide a comprehensive Citizenship Preparation Program. Clients can receive assistance with the Naturalization Application process and Civics-Focused ESL classes to prepare them for the USCIS Citizenship Exam. Our High School Equivalency class can provide a new opportunity to adult students who did not complete high school due to barriers of systemic and personal nature. LALDEF provides High School Equivalency courses that prepare students for a GED High School Diploma.

Adult Education also supports a program called **Latinas Unidas**, an opportunity for women in our community to come together once a month and have educational workshops designed for women.

## Legal Services

LALDEF's Immigration Legal Services team provides potential clients free immigration legal screenings. LALDEF's Immigration Legal Department handles the following immigration cases:

- Filing of Applications for Naturalization & Citizenship
- Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS)
- Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)
- Adjustment of Status
- Renewals of Green Cards and Work Permits
- Temporary Protected Status (TPS)
- Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) provisions
- U Visas for victims of crime

This year, the Immigration Legal Services Department has hosted three events: an all-day screening event, an event for Temporary Protected Status, and an event for SIJS. One highlighted event was when potential clients deemed eligible for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status were invited back to LALDEF for further screening and document collection. LALDEF signed on 25 new cases for SIJS. LALDEF Legal Services will assist 28 clients with naturalization cases and welcome seven new United States citizens.

# Voting In Mercer County, NJ

By Paula Sollami Covello, Mercer County Clerk

As the Mercer County Clerk, I am proud to serve our vibrant and diverse community and assist the public in administering our County elections. To ensure that every eligible citizen can participate in this essential civic duty, I am pleased to share important information about voter registration and the three ways to vote in New Jersey. Voter registration is the first step in making your voice heard in local, state, and national elections. Registering to vote is a straightforward process, and it provides you with the power to influence decisions that affect your community ranging from education and healthcare to infrastructure and public safety.

## How to Register to Vote

**Eligibility:** To register to vote in Mercer County, you must be a U.S. citizen, at least 18 years old by Election Day, and a resident of New Jersey for at least 30 days prior to the election.

**Where to Register:** You can register to vote online through the New Jersey Division of Elections website, or by mail, or in person at the Office of the Superintendent of Elections Walker M. Worthy, Jr.. You may also register in your municipal clerk's office, or at any NJ Motor Vehicle Commission agency. The online link to register can be found at <https://www.nj.gov/state/elections/voter-registration.shtml> where you choose your County of residence to pull up your application.

**Required Information:** When registering, you'll need to provide your name, address, date of birth, and a valid ID, such as a driver's license or Social Security number. Remember, you must be a U.S. citizen to apply.

**Deadlines:** Keep an eye on the voter registration deadlines, which in NJ is 21 days before an election. Deadlines can be found on the Mercer County Elections page found at <https://www.mercercounty.org/government/county-clerk/elections>. For the November 5, General Election the voter registration deadline is October 15, 2024.

Once you have registered to vote, you can vote in one of three ways:

1) **Vote-by-Mail** You can vote-by-mail by simply filling out a vote by mail application found on my website (see below), or by checking the vote by mail box on the voter registration form. My Office will then send you a ballot in the mail. Once you complete your vote by mail ballot and sign the envelope, you can return it by mail or to a Mercer County drop box. Drop boxes are a convenient and reliable option



for returning your mail-in ballot. Drop box locations can be found at <https://www.mercercounty.org/government/county-clerk/elections/vote-by-mail-drop-box-location>

2) **Early Voting** You can vote early at any of your County's early voting locations, during the early voting period, October 26th through November 3rd. Mercer County's early voting locations and hours are listed on the Mercer County Clerk's website (below). Or,

3) **At the Polls** You can vote at the polls on Election Day. Your polling location would be found on your sample ballot that comes in the mail approximately two weeks prior to Election Day. In sum, the State of NJ makes it easy and convenient to cast a vote, when it works during your schedule.

**Remember voting is not just a right; it's a responsibility. Every vote counts, and every election is an opportunity to shape the future of our community.** Whether you're a first-time voter or a long-time participant, your contribution to the democratic process is invaluable. I encourage everyone in Mercer County to take the necessary steps to register and vote. If you have any questions or need assistance, please do not hesitate to contact the Mercer County Clerk's office at 609-989-6495. Together, we can ensure that our community's voice is strong and representative of all its members.

For more information, visit the Clerk's election page, or the New Jersey Department of State - Division of Elections - NJ Voter Information Portal, or call the County Clerk's Election Office at 609-989-6495. For polling location questions, or to become a poll worker, you may contact the Mercer County Board of Elections Office at 609-989-6522.



LATIN AMERICAN LEGAL  
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**Working together moves  
this work forward.**



**Visit [laldef.org](https://laldef.org) today.**



## **This year's paddle with Futuro Students is scheduled for August 14!**

A test for both the body and mind, conquering the kayak can be a rewarding experience! Our August 14th trip, hosted at Bordentown Beach by D&R Greenway Land Trust, will feature a series of games and challenges, giving participants the chance to master the basics of kayaking, while making unforgettable memories with each stroke of the paddle. Providing youth from our Futuro program the opportunity to be on the water, explore the outdoors, and develop an appreciation for our community's natural resources is an investment that will continue to make an impact for years to come. **Thanks to the support of D&R Greenway and The William Penn Foundation, LALDEF youth will hone a new skill while learning about our watershed.**



## **3rd Annual Hispanic Heritage Resource & Wellness Fair - October 12**

In the upcoming months, LALDEF is preparing to host its 3rd Annual Hispanic Heritage Resource and Wellness fair, scheduled for Saturday, October 12, 2024, at St. Mary's Cathedral in Trenton, NJ

Last year, the fair hosted over 30 organizations and drew over 200 participants.