



LIGHTNING IN A BOTTLE

Building Lasting
Growth from
Viral Moments

Adela de la Torre

with Rachel Baker, Robert Bray and Marjorie Fine

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	3
Introduction	4
Case Study: National Immigration Law Center	6
Case Study: Inland Coalition for Immigrant Justice	14
Conclusion	20
Tips—Putting It Into Practice	22
Discussion Questions	24

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Most importantly, we thank immigrant movement leaders Martín Batalla Vidal and Alex and Wilson (first-names only by request) for bravely sharing their stories with others, and countless organizers and activists for building a stronger movement for social justice.

Finally, the authors join the staff of ICIJ to lift up Aidé Arana, who brought passion and talent to the work featured in these pages. We dedicate this report to her memory.



Aidé Arana, 1988-2019

FOREWORD

At the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, we first started tuning in to the evolving dynamics that are the focus of this report before they made national headlines. It was 2015, and we were working with author Cynthia Gibson on the study: [Beyond Fundraising](#). Cynthia observed that “a rapidly evolving digital landscape is transforming the ways we communicate, work, socialize, and, yes, fundraise.” She suggested that the hard lines between donors and activists were blurring, so that “fundraising can no longer be decoupled from engagement.”

At the time, not everyone was convinced that the digital era would meaningfully alter the way people connected to the causes and issues they care about. But when Donald Trump became president, the changes accelerated dramatically, becoming difficult to dismiss. Millions of Americans stepped forward to demonstrate, write legislators, volunteer, and donate at unprecedented levels. The ACLU, for example, saw membership explode from 400,000 to 1.84 million as online donations grew from \$4 million a year to \$120 million.

At first, we wondered if the shifts in activism and donations were affecting only large, name-brand social change organizations. But we quickly learned that many of the Haas, Jr. Fund’s grantees working on issues like immigrant rights—even the smaller organizations—were also experiencing an increase in volunteers, activism, and unsolicited donations. As a result, we began to wonder how we might better support these and other social justice organizations in finding ways to leverage the potential of new opportunities in the digital era to grow supporters and raise money for the long haul.

This is emergent work; there are no widely established best practices. Fundraising, communications, and organizing practices are still catching up. But when did the lack of a blueprint ever stop social justice organizations from innovating? Even during an unprecedented time of political struggle around racial justice and immigrant rights, advocates have found ways to innovate, raise funds, communicate values-based messages, and thrive.

We commissioned this report to share how two immigrant rights organizations that did just that. We hope these “bright spot” stories about the National Immigration Law Center (NILC) and Inland Coalition for Immigrant Justice (ICIJ) will provide inspiration and practical takeaways for leaders of other social justice organizations seeking to adapt to the moment.

We are grateful to principal author Adela de la Torre, whose experience leading communications at NILC and deep commitment to supporting other immigrant rights activists shine through in the pages that follow. We also are thankful for the partnership and important contributions of communications and fundraising experts, Robert Bray, NEO Philanthropy, and Marjorie Fine, to this report.

We hope these two case stories help fuel an important conversation about what it takes to meld mobilization, fundraising, communications, and digital strategies to create stronger movements for change.



Rachel Baker
Director of Innovation and Special Initiatives
The Haas Leadership Initiatives

INTRODUCTION

As the Trump administration engaged in a relentless campaign to marginalize and criminalize immigrant families in the aftermath of the 2016 elections, millions of people across the country rose up for equality and justice.

Recent years have brought new challenges and opportunities to galvanize attention and action in movements in the digital era. In response, grassroots organizations have been left to experiment on their own, as there is still little by way of a blueprint to follow. But some social justice organizations are finding new ways to build power and raise money at unprecedented scale.

This is the story of how two organizations—the National Immigration Law Center (NILC) and the Inland Coalition for Immigrant Justice (ICIJ)—are finding new ways to “capture lightning in a bottle,” leveraging opportunities to dramatically expand and activate their base of supporters and raise money from individuals. By lifting up their examples, we hope to contribute to dialogue about what other organizations can do to turn moments of heightened visibility and crisis into opportunities to grow movements and power for the long haul.

BACKGROUND

Recent years have seen extraordinary shifts in patterns of engagement. These changes accelerated throughout the Trump administration, when people stepped up in new ways to make their voices heard in response to heinous actions at the federal, state and local levels. In many instances, social media played a key role in galvanizing widespread momentum and attention, such as #NoMuslimBan, #FamiliesBelongTogether, #MeToo, and #BlackLivesMatter.

During those viral moments, people who had once stayed on the sidelines took more active roles, joining protests, contacting public officials, and making donations at unprecedented levels. Some social justice organizations benefited from this energy, experiencing rapid growth and an influx of cash and attention that, in a few cases, even exceeded their annual budgets. But even for those lucky organizations, many questions remained: Was this simply a “Trump bump”? Would these moments of rapid acceleration in support and engagement truly last, or would they quickly dissipate, leaving groups in the same place as before? How could they keep their bigger base of supporters engaged and set their organizations on a trajectory for sustained growth?

During those viral moments, people who had once stayed on the sidelines took more active roles, joining protests, contacting public officials, and making donations at unprecedented levels.

Real change requires ongoing engagement and sustained action; the challenge is how to leverage these “lightning in a bottle” moments to build long-term power and sustainable organizations.

Though the National Immigration Law Center (NILC) and the Inland Coalition for Immigrant Justice (ICIJ) are quite different when it comes to their missions, sizes, and strategies, they share some core mindsets and management practices that created the conditions for success.

In particular, their stories suggest the need to revisit longstanding assumptions about the relationship between communications, organizing, and fundraising. Put simply, groups need to ensure that power and money are not left on the table. Integrating communications, mobilization, and fundraising in new ways includes:



COMMUNICATIONS
Developing persuasive, targeted messaging; creating a distinct organizational voice on social media; and engaging in powerful storytelling.

MOBILIZATION
Creating opportunities for more meaningful audience engagement with an organization or cause, from commenting on regulations or sharing posts to participating in marches or rallies.

FUNDRAISING
Evolving from treating donors as check writers to engaging them as co-actors in the quest for social justice; and developing communication loops between donors and organizations.

It is our hope that the stories of these two organizations provide ideas and inspiration for others who are interested not only in catching lightning in a bottle, but in using those moments to build power to fuel organizations and movements for years.



Los Angeles May Day march. Photo: Jonathan McIntosh



NATIONAL IMMIGRATION LAW CENTER (NILC): SUSTAINING RAPID GROWTH

At the beginning of 2016, the National Immigration Law Center was a national law and policy organization that, although highly respected in its field, was not widely known beyond legal and policy circles. Only 3% of its budget came from individual donors, and its email list was directed at an inner circle of staunch supporters.

Within months after the election, NILC's donor ranks swelled exponentially, and its public visibility expanded to include tens of thousands of new followers. More than simply dollars, the increased support and funding from individuals gave NILC greater autonomy to explore new ideas, launch exploratory projects, and chart its own priorities for immigrant justice.

Below is a look at what NILC did to harness the power of a viral moment. Although it would be easy to dismiss this as a "right place, right time" scenario, NILC's story highlights the deliberate steps it took to prepare for, tap, and follow up on the moment to grow power and resources for the long haul.

The Organization

Established in 1979, the National Immigration Law Center works to defend and advance the rights and opportunities of low-income immigrants. The organization uses three strategies to advance this mission: legal and policy advocacy, movement building, and narrative and culture change.

NILC leapfrogged from bit player in the digital landscape to an immigrant rights organization with an enviably large following, growing in 24 hours from 15,000 Twitter followers to nearly 50,000.

Tapping the Moment

Shortly after the 2016 election, NILC catapulted onto the national stage when it filed the first lawsuit to challenge Trump's now-infamous Muslim ban, together with the ACLU, the International Refugee Assistance Project, and Yale Law School.

The lawsuit was a galvanizing moment for one of the first mass mobilizations against Trump. As one of the organizations in the eye of storm, NILC was now known to thousands more people in a short period of time.

Graphics from NILC and Resilience Force
"Immigrants Are Essential" Campaign,
(NILC Instagram page, 2020)



NILC leapfrogged from bit player in the digital landscape to an immigrant rights organization with an enviably large following, growing in 24 hours from 15,000 Twitter followers to nearly 50,000, with similar growth in its Facebook audience. The organization's email list swelled from 20,000 subscribers to nearly 80,000.

The visibility also led to a crush of donor attention. The election of Donald Trump followed by quick action on the legal front catapulted NILC's donor base from a group of several hundred loyal supporters to an army of more than 16,000 new donors looking to join the resistance.

Through deliberate positioning and relationship-building, NILC shifted to become spokespeople and opinionmakers with the goal of both informing the debate on immigration issues and driving a pro-immigrant agenda.

Luck Favors the Prepared

All of this could be dismissed as luck, but **NILC laid the groundwork for this exponential growth well before the elections.** Long before Trump signed his first executive orders, the organization made changes that were key to its success in capturing lightning in a bottle.



FUNDRAISING

Well before 2016, Executive Director Marielena Hincapié and the NILC board set a goal to diversify the group's revenue streams. At that time, NILC was dangerously dependent on foundation support. Individual donations were a little more than **3 percent** of the organization's \$5 million budget in 2015, with grants making up more than 90 percent.

Although NILC had strong relationships with foundations, the lack of a diversified revenue stream left it vulnerable to changes in philanthropic priorities. Hincapié and the development team of Marisa Aguayo and Acasia Flores worked with fundraising consultants to develop a strategy to build and strengthen a robust individual donor program. Attracting new and retaining current donors was a core metric to achieve that goal.



COMMUNICATIONS

Under Hincapié's leadership, NILC staff had also been shifting its communications strategy long before the elections. Communications staff worked jointly with development staff to begin to collaboratively shape donor communications, while also working to build NILC's reputation with reporters at outlets ranging from *The New York Times* to **Bustle**. Through deliberate

positioning and relationship-building, Hincapié and the staff shifted to become spokespeople and opinionmakers with the goal of both informing the debate on immigration issues and driving a pro-immigrant agenda.

The combination of greater visibility for the executive director and NILC experts in the media, improved collaboration across departmental communications channels, and deeper relationships with reporters led to a leap in visibility for the organization. Ultimately, a reporter whom NILC was working closely with featured the organization on a short list of go-to nonprofits working on immigration immediately after the 2016 election.



NILC had prepared for the possibility of a Trump victory when few thought it plausible, even creating a know-your-rights package, statement, and donation appeal. The group's scenario planning included working across the organization and with partners from other organizations to discuss legal theories and potential lawsuits. The intense planning and coordination allowed the litigators, communications staff, and advocacy staff to move quickly and across multiple channels as issues were unfolding to determine potential lawsuits and messaging. It also gave NILC a huge head start when it came to mobilizing support for immigrant communities.

Innovation is Built on a Culture of Trust and Curiosity

While the work above created the conditions for NILC's exponential growth, **leveraging the opportunity in the moment hinged on an organizational culture and structure that could move quickly and work collaboratively to try new things.**

Executive Director Hincapié had a clear vision for growth that included delegating major decisions about systems, structures, and even audiences to staff members, with each of them reporting back at regular intervals on progress. In interviews, both Aguayo and Hincapié underscored the culture of mutual trust—staff had faith in Hincapié's vision, while she trusted in her staff's ability to navigate new territory. This gave the communications and development directors room and confidence to experiment and move quickly to seize new opportunities and to leverage momentum in the moment and beyond.

Engaging New Supporters

A critical challenge for NILC was how to engage its new supporters so the moment would move people from one-time supporters to long-term allies. The greatly expanded audience of donors presented both an opportunity and a conundrum. Development and communications staff would need to experiment with new and different types of engagement.

NILC's typical emails were informationally nutritious, but dry and not engaging. Subscribers were assumed to be an "inside audience" and were treated as passive recipients of information. It was clear that this "old" communications approach would not draw in the new supporters.

Staff set out to experiment with how they could engage supporters beyond the check. "We were grateful for the donations," explains Hincapié, "but we wanted to engage these people as participants in our democracy."

Making data your friend

NILC took a data-driven approach to better understand how to engage new supporters. It hired an outside consultant to help with list growth, retention, and experimentation.

The consultant's approach to data analysis helped both development and communications staff determine what kinds of emails were most effective with whom. Staff experimented with making emails less specialized and more action-oriented. Open rates confirmed that longer, "explainer"-style communications were less effective than shorter emails and messages that gave people a clear, meaningful action to take. For example, instead of providing a dry analysis of a proposed piece of legislation, NILC shifted to explain why such legislation was harmful or helpful for immigrants, offering supporters

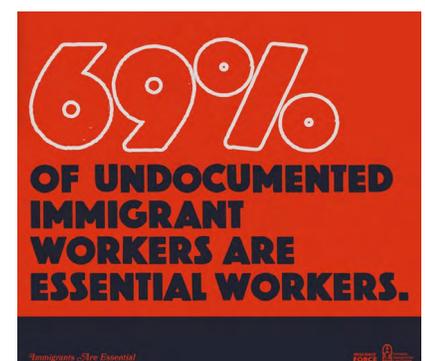
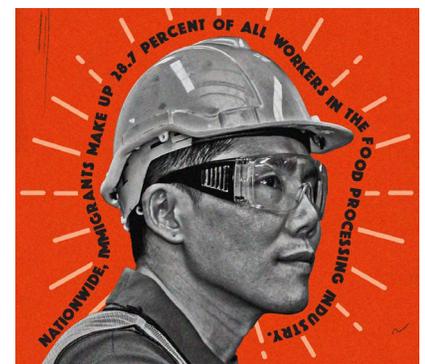
an easy way to do something about it. Supporters were invited to take action in multiple ways that could include communicating with immigrant leaders, contacting Congress, or leaving public comment on federal platforms and making donations to support the work.

Development and communications staff met multiple times each week to determine email

and digital strategy, based in large part on supporter engagement data. The result was a major shift in list segmentation and online communications practices.

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Graphics from NILC and Resilience Force
"Immigrants are Essential" Campaign,
(NILC Instagram page, 2020)





NILC EMAILS: BEFORE AND AFTER

ORIGINAL NILC EMAIL

Much has been happening in the immigrants' rights world the past few weeks! This is a quick summary of some of these developments, as well as an invitation for you to join a [webinar](#) on **Friday, July 18, at 11 a.m. Pacific / 2 p.m. Eastern** time to learn more and to share what you have been hearing.

TIME-SENSITIVE:

ACA 3-Year Work Permits Being Recalled

In order to comply with an order of the federal district court in the *Texas v. U.S.* case, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services is **taking back 3-year work permits from DACA recipients who were issued such permits after February 16, 2015** (regardless of whether they received their DACA approval notice before or after that date). USCIS has mailed a letter and called these people asking them to mail back their 3-year EADs. **It is critical that as many affected DACA recipients as possible take the notice seriously**, because otherwise they could suffer adverse consequences. More information about this development is available in an [alert created by NILC and United We Dream](#).

Death in San Francisco Reignites Enforcement Debate

In the wake of the tragic death of a young woman in San Francisco, there has been a [renewed national debate](#) about the role that local law enforcement should play in enforcing immigration laws. Some politicians are taking advantage of this incident to scapegoat not just the immigrant community but also those cities that have passed community trust policies. In response, several groups created a "[backgrounder](#)" on this issue.

New Study Details DACA's Positive Impact

NILC coauthored, with **Professor Tom K. Wong** and the **Center for American Progress**, a nationwide [study of DACA recipients](#) whose results reveal that DACA has had a dramatically positive impact on the lives of DACAmented people.

Texas v. U.S. Hearing in New Orleans

Over 600 people from a variety of organizations traveled to New Orleans last week to be present during a hearing in the *Texas v. U.S.* case before a panel of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. The court heard arguments in the federal government's appeal of the lower court's order that is preventing President Obama's DAPA (Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents) and expanded DACA initiatives from being implemented. Hundreds of people held a spirited rally outside the courthouse, while a few blocks away courageous community members blocked off a street to protest ICE and deportations.

More details about all these issues will be provided during Friday's [NILC Updates and Action Alerts: Enforcement, DACA, and Litigation](#) webinar. To sign up for the webinar and receive the call-in information, complete and submit this [online form](#).

PHOTOS — *Top*: New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice's members shut down the street in front of the New Orleans ICE building. *Bottom*: Rep. Luis Gutierrez speaks to the crowd in front of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals.

Lots of information

Impersonal (no "Dear first name")

No call to action

Assumes a high level of immigration expertise—this is an email written for people who are already deep into the immigration world

No stories or personal connections to an issue

No opportunities for two way engagement or feedback solicitation of any kind



NEW NILC EMAIL

Richard,

Trump's anti-immigrant, anti-family agenda took a cruel new twist today.

Just moments ago, the Trump administration unveiled a new proposed regulation that penalizes immigrant families for simply accessing basic needs to feed their children and keep their families healthy.

Right away, we need your help to spread the word.

[Share on Facebook](#)
[Post Tweet](#)

Under the proposed regulation, the “public charge” rule would allow Trump to establish a rigged immigration system where green cards would only be available to the wealthy few while immigrant families — many with U.S. citizen children — with modest incomes could be denied the possibility of a permanent future together.

The Trump administration is required **by law** to post this unjust proposed order on Regulations.gov for **60 days** before finalizing the regulation, to give the public the opportunity to weigh in. If people like you post comments against the order, we stand a better chance of disrupting or even stopping it.

Once the Trump administration has posted its order to the federal website, we'll follow up and let you know how you can directly submit your own comment opposing Trump's proposed family separation and starvation regulation.

In the meantime, please spread the word about this cruel proposed regulation by sharing this email or posting to social media.

[Share on Facebook](#)
[Post Tweet](#)

Your voice matters.

Thank you and stayed tuned,

Marielena Hincapié
NILC Executive Director

Clear “to” line
(this is addressed to a person)

Simple definition of the problem, without too much “explainer” language

Easy-to-take action and clear theory of change (with multiple links)

Emails are focused on one topic and one action

This shift in voice and perspective was not without risk: staff and longtime supporters alike would have to get used to a new tone and new types of emails. Long-term donors and staffers could, for example, have balked at the switch from information-heavy emails to action-oriented notes. But the new approach paid off; engagement rates across all platforms exceeded benchmarks for the year, and development staff exceeded their retention goals. Hincapié noted that taking a data-driven approach toward supporter engagement also made her more comfortable allowing communications and development staff to take greater initiative.

Today, NILC staffers continue to use the data from email and other online interactions to learn more about their audience. Click rates, donation rates, and other metrics help NILC understand its new community and learn more about how best to bring people more deeply into the immigrant rights movement.

The organization succeeded in retaining a larger audience, and NILC's revenue stream has become much less foundation dependent. As of 2019, foundation support has shifted from 90 to 63 percent, with the remaining revenue coming from a mix of individual contributions, legal fees, and corporate support. The organization has tripled its staff, investing heavily in communications and development positions with expertise in digital communications and individual giving. While the larger size presents its own challenges, the organization continues to experiment with best practices for creating efficient internal communications loops now that its staff is larger.

The biggest change for NILC is that its brand identity and outreach have undergone a paradigm shift—from an organization focused on acting as a legal interpreter for its audience toward one that mobilizes and engages everyday individuals to participate in advocating for a more inclusive immigration system.

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Rally signs protesting the Trump administration's decision to end DACA. Photo: Essie McGivern



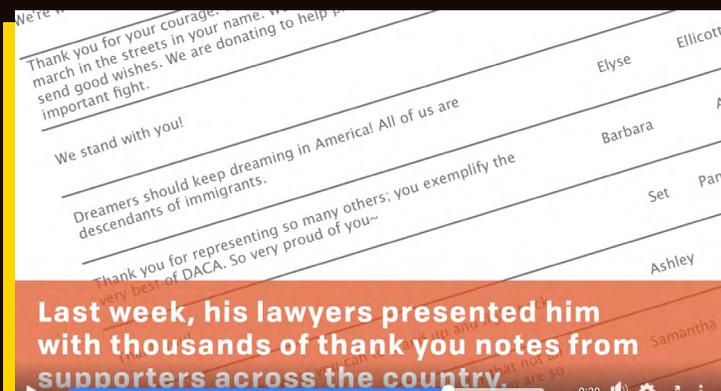
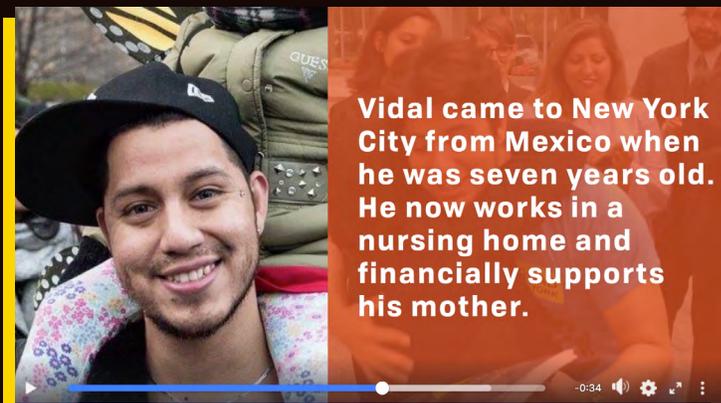
THANK YOU MARTÍN!

One of the most inspiring experiments to integrate NILC's communications and development into programmatic work was inspired by a courageous young man, **Martín Batalla Vidal**. A young LGBTQ immigrant, Batalla Vidal was the named plaintiff in one of the civil rights cases to protect the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. As the face in the media of this high-profile, high-stakes litigation on behalf of hundreds of thousands of undocumented young people across the country, Batalla Vidal became the target of vicious hate mail.

Thinking quickly, NILC communications and development staff, in concert with co-counsel at Make the Road-New York and Yale Law School, reached out to supporters and invited them to join in a "Thank You, Martín" campaign. Thousands of supporters wrote with heartfelt support, and the legal team compiled their letters into a book they presented to Martín. Watch the [video here](#).

This creative and meaningful way of inviting supporters to speak up and lend their voices to combat the hate mail and recognize Batalla Vidal's courage, shows how NILC began to shift its communications approach from a one-way megaphone" toward a two-way conversation to deepen supporter engagement.

Stills from video of Marielena Hincapié presenting Martín Batalla Vidal with thank you notes from supporters, 2017 (NILC Facebook page)





INLAND COALITION FOR IMMIGRANT JUSTICE: CURIOSITY AND ADAPTABILITY

The Inland Coalition for Immigrant Justice (ICIJ) was a small, but powerful, regional immigrant rights organization. Following the 2016 election, it built outsize visibility and clout over four of the most hostile years towards immigrants in recent history.

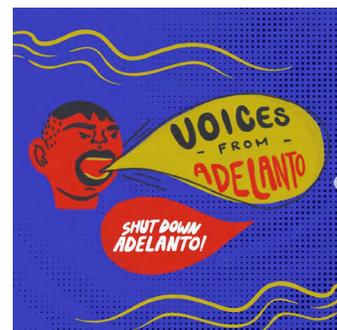
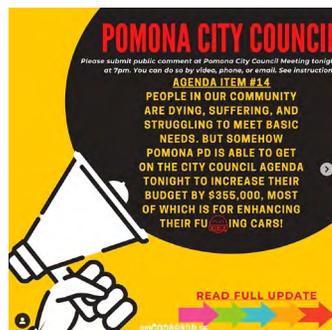
ICIJ's online presence exploded, growing at a rate that vastly exceeds industry benchmarks. For example, on Instagram, its followers have grown from 1,666 in 2019 to more than 9,000 in 2020. And, over the two years leading up to 2020, despite the pandemic-related economic depression, ICIJ more than doubled its individual donors, from 300 to more than 750. Individual donors have contributed more than \$100,000, enabling the organization to direct resources to community members experiencing extreme hardship.

Often, funders, communicators, and others erroneously believe that a local focus or fiscal sponsorship can limit an organization's potential for growth. ICIJ's case story below shows how these aspects of the organization's identity create the space for creativity and experimentation. This story provides a window into how ICIJ was able to create engagement and mobilization points for its communities to engage in local action on issues of national importance.

The Organization

ICIJ was founded in the aftermath of George W. Bush-era anti-immigrant worksite and community raids in Southern California. The coalition is led by and centered around immigrants, especially those criminalized by the current immigration system. As a member of the undocumented immigrant youth movement, Executive Director Javier Hernandez leads ICIJ with a spirit of radical inclusion. ICIJ has grown from a small, fiscally-sponsored group to a coalition of more than 50 organizations working to advance immigrant justice in the Inland Empire region of the state.

ICIJ Calls to Action
(ICIJ Instagram Feed, 2020)



ICIJ has grown from a small, fiscally-sponsored group to a coalition of more than 50 organizations working to advance immigrant justice in the Inland Empire region of the state.

Tapping the Moment

In the winter of 2018, the Trump administration launched a draconian “zero tolerance” policy toward immigrants seeking asylum in the United States, leading to the family separation crisis that dominated national headlines for weeks.

In California’s Inland Empire, ICIJ learned of the abysmal treatment of immigrants detained at the nearby federal prison in Victorville and a detention center in Adelanto. Hernandez and ICIJ staff quickly mobilized coalition members to press for improved conditions and the release of detainees. Former and current detained individuals were reporting poor medical treatment and abuse at the hands of staff. Among the victims were two young brothers who had fled Central America seeking asylum and the chance for a new life, Alex and Wilson.

Trapped in miserable conditions, the brothers faced an exorbitant bail set at \$11,000 each. With little hope

Using a bit.ly link to bring in funds through GoFundMe, the organization created videos, photos, and posts to help keep Alex and Wilson’s story in social media.

of getting out for months if not years. Alex grew deeply worried when his younger brother fell into despair and began losing his will to live. ICIJ knew it had to work fast to raise the money to get Wilson out.

The urgency of the situation inspired ICIJ to bring greater visibility to the brothers’ plight, raise bail from individual donors, and build momentum to address inhumane conditions at the local immigrant detention facility. The group worked rapidly to develop a plan for raising the brothers’ bond funds in partnership with other members of the coalition, including the local Catholic Church and local unions. ICIJ experimented with a variety of online and offline tactics for the first time, including a GoFundMe campaign.

Free Alex & Wilson

We are only
\$3,000
away from
being able to
pay Alex's
bond

Donate:
[Bit.ly/FreeAlexWilson](https://bit.ly/FreeAlexWilson)

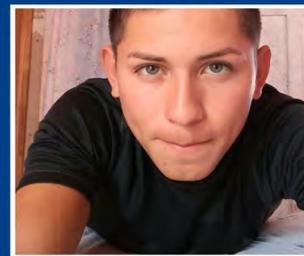


Deportation Defense Fund

#GivingTuesday2018



Help us **FREE WILSON**
from immigration
detention before his
19th Birthday!



Donate:
[Bit.ly/FreeAlexWilson](https://bit.ly/FreeAlexWilson)

Various donation appeals to free Alex and Wilson, 2018
(ICIJ Instagram and Facebook pages)

Ultimately, they were able to raise enough money to free Wilson in only weeks with donations ranging from \$5 to \$500.

To keep momentum going, ICIJ filmed Wilson's emotional release, sharing his powerful testimony with those who had helped donate and organize. Using a bit.ly link to bring in funds through GoFundMe, the organization created videos, photos,

The successful action galvanized the Inland Empire community, which had until then not been asked to participate directly in freeing community members.

and posts to help keep Alex and Wilson's story in social media. Wilson's release video was viewed thousands of times, creating the sense of urgency needed to raise the remaining \$11,000 to release Alex in just two weeks. The \$22,000 ICIJ raised in this short amount of time was more than it had ever raised from individual donors to that point.

When Alex and Wilson were finally reunited, the organization celebrated a rare victory at a difficult time for the immigrant rights movement. Although

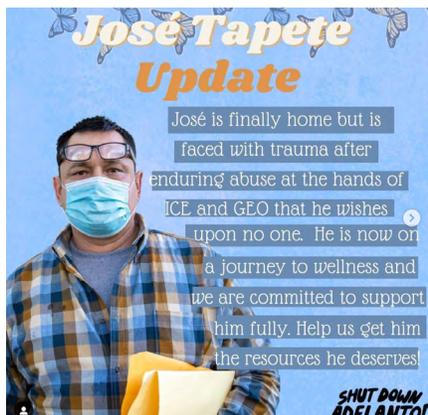
this level of activism was common in other parts of the state, the successful action galvanized the Inland Empire community, which had until then not been asked to participate directly in freeing community members. ICIJ used the campaign to create a sense of community among followers and supporters. Some of these new supporters are now active participants in bond efforts to free other community members, and the work has expanded to include programs to empower immigrants who have been released from detention facilities.

Leveraging and Sustaining the Power

Since its early experiment to free Alex and Wilson, ICIJ has continued to effectively integrate communications, fundraising and organizing strategies in a mounting campaign to shut down the Adelanto detention facility. During the pandemic,

for example, ICIJ helped a whistleblower inside the facility raise the alarm that he and other detainees were being poisoned by harsh chemical disinfectants. The story garnered national attention, and an online petition demanding a stop to the use of poisons garnered almost 1.5 million signatures.

ICIJ has followed up with its new supporters, inviting them to take additional action such as contributing to rolling bond



funds that will allow detainees to be released while awaiting their hearings. ICIJ also has continued to lift up the activism of the detained whistleblower who brought information about Adelanto's damaging chemicals to light. When ICE retaliated against him, ICIJ rallied supporters to keep him in the United States; he has now been released from detention.

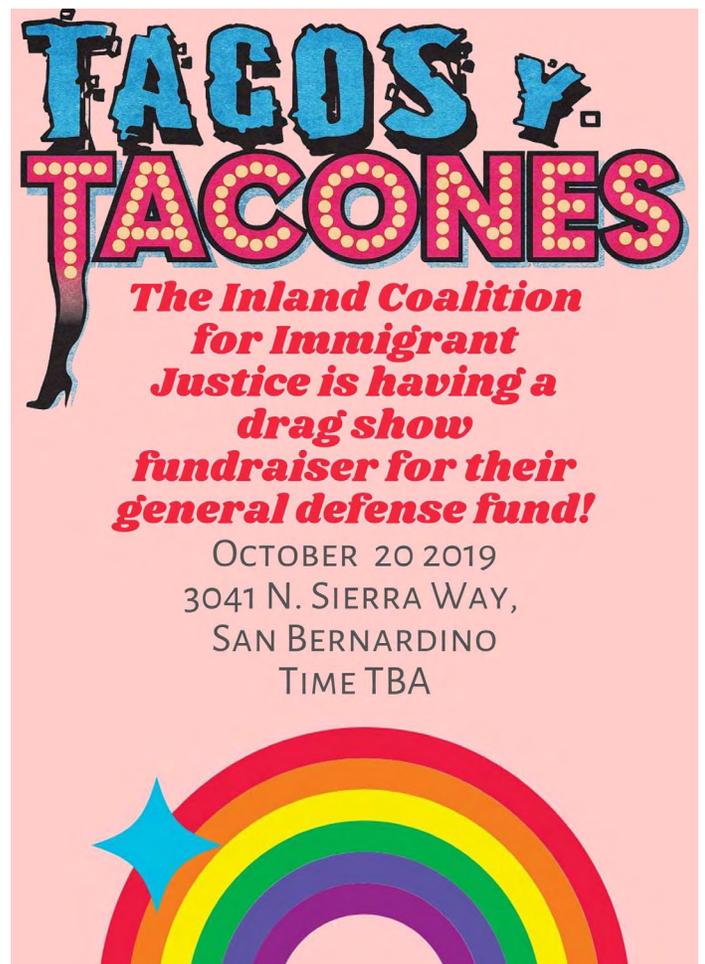
The successful campaign to free Alex and Wilson showed the Inland Empire community that ICIJ was a force capable of creating real change for immigrants and also helped ICIJ build an approach for continued growth in fundraising and digital engagement.

Yet, ICIJ's ability to capitalize on an urgent moment is about more than organizing tactics, communications strategies, and fundraising alone. Under Hernandez's leadership, ICIJ has created an organizational culture that supports rapid innovation and experimentation while staying grounded in core values and vision.

Encouraging diverse perspectives while centering immigrant voices.

Hernandez's inclusive management and leadership style invites all people to join in the fight for immigrant rights, whether they are supporters or members of the organization. Today, ICIJ's donor base extends far beyond the Inland Empire; donations come in from across the country.

As ICIJ has grown, Hernandez has welcomed new voices, contributions, and ideas. For example, while some organizations centralize official spokespeople, ICIJ's social media and messaging channels feature not just a variety of staff and coalition members, but also immigrant community members. This multiple-voices approach isn't without risk; additional voices increase the chance that organization spokespeople may make contradictory



Top: ICIJ social media feed; Bottom: Flyer for an ICIJ community-centric fundraiser, 2019

statements, or dilute the brand identity. But the effect is powerful, with ICIJ's social media streams embodying the spirit of radical inclusivity that permeates other aspects of the organization's culture.

ICIJ Communications Director Armando Carmona spoke of the group's messaging being rooted in the voices and experiences of immigrant community members. This helps create an authentic, consistent voice that is recognizable to the community, allies, and target audiences. ICIJ's Instagram features frequent videos narrated by immigrants, as do its Facebook messages. What unites the many perspectives is the shared understanding of the power of centering the immigrant voice.

Nurture creativity and experimentation.

ICIJ staff are entrusted with a high degree of freedom to make their own suggestions and bring creativity to their roles. Staffer Mario Perez notes, "Javier has a unique style of engaging the team to bring people's perspectives out," thus creating space for experimentation and shared ownership of fundraising, communications, or mobilization efforts.

Perez, who leads many aspects of the organization's work with previously detained individuals, devised creative fundraising strategies that reflect the interests and needs of the community. For example, observing that many formerly detained immigrants are both Latinx and also members of the LGBTQ community, he experimented with a Halloween-themed drag brunch featuring local performers who donated their time. Dubbed "Tacos y Tacones" (tacos and high heels), the event included testimony from an asylum seeker who had been released from Adelanto. "I'm trying to develop fundraising events that'll be sustained by those who are directly impacted," explains Perez.

ICIJ also exhibits a spirit of experimentation in nearly all of its communications efforts. Campaigns often come together over hours rather than days. Not all of these efforts succeed, of course, but ICIJ is willing to experiment in the moment, rather than miss the mobilization opportunity by spending too much time on an engagement plan. The Covid-19 pandemic provides an example of this approach in action. No longer able to hold the rallies and marches to draw attention to abusive practices at the local detention facility, ICIJ has engaged in car rallies and other shows of solidarity that allow members to continue to show up while practicing physical distancing.

Multiple funding channels provide people easy ways to give.

In 2018, ICIJ created the structure for what is now commonly known as a mutual aid effort. After Trump walked back his "zero tolerance" immigrant detention efforts, border agents began dropping off immigrants at bus stations in border zones across the Southwest. These immigrants were often thousands of miles from their final destination, but they were left with little more than clothing on their backs.

In response, ICIJ activated networks on social media and elsewhere to raise small sums of money to enable immigrants to continue their journey to their final destinations with dignity. Hernandez and his team used technologies like Venmo and SMS to enable giving, rather than pushing everyone through a centralized web-based donation site. They also made sure to target all of their audiences, providing multilingual donor appeals. For example, during an interview on Spanish-language radio, Hernandez invited listeners to text "apoyo" to a number to help out, eliciting contributions from listeners around

the country. Hernandez estimates ICIJ raised over \$15,000 on Venmo and \$20,000 on GoFundMe over the two-week period to supply immigrants with the basics needed to help sustain them on their journeys to other parts of the country.

The Bottom Line

ICIJ's experience demonstrates how creating a trusting culture that values curiosity and experimentation can empower staff to find new and innovative ways to engage supporters, raise resources and build power. As the organization grows, it has continued to emphasize an inclusive, collaborative approach toward communications, mobilization, and fundraising.



The ICIJ team at the Annual ICIJ Gala 2019. Photo: Erika Paz

CONCLUSION

To keep pace with new dynamics in social change that have emerged in the digital era, longstanding approaches to fundraising, communications and organizing need to evolve. While there is no one blueprint for mobilizing supporters in this new environment, the two stories above underscore the importance of fostering a collaborative, trusting organizational culture that drives innovation and greater integration across functions.

For each organization, three elements stand out as key to adapting to changing dynamics and relationships with their supporters: integration, trust, and curiosity.

Integration

To make the most of new mobilization opportunities, NILC and ICIJ integrated communications, fundraising and organizing in new ways. As a larger organization, NILC has had to create new systems and strategies to ensure that staff members are communicating and collaborating effectively. At a smaller organization, like ICIJ, integration of these functions flowed from an invitation to all staff to try new things outside their comfort zones. “It’s all interconnected,” Hernandez says about ICIJ’s work, noting that everything from fundraising to door knocking to shutting down immigrant detention facilities is of equal value to the organization. Neither organization could have achieved sustained growth if these functions were siloed.

Organizations seeking to increase integration can consider whether they are making space for integrating their internal structures. Are managers rewarding staff members who make time to integrate across departments or functions in the same way they might reward a staffer who is productive in other ways? How might organizations shift mindsets to prioritize integration?

Trust

To innovate and move, staff need to feel empowered to make big decisions quickly, and also feel secure enough to risk failure. At NILC, for example, staff members experimented with several different email styles before finding what resonated with the organization’s newer, larger audience. This carried the real risk of alienating current supporters. But if management had been afraid to experiment with new styles or, worse, reacted poorly to an email or post with low open rates, it would have prevented the staff from learning what worked best for NILC’s newly expanded audiences. At ICIJ, trust extends to the voices of immigrant and coalition members, many of whom play prominent roles on the organization’s social media channels.

For each organization, three elements stand out as key to adapting to changing dynamics and relationships with their supporters: integration, trust, and curiosity.

This trust creates the environment for ICIJ to have a community-driven voice that resonates on its platforms.

Trust flows from top management, but it must also be reciprocated. Staffers should have a clear understanding of a manager's vision and trust that the vision will move the organization in the right direction.

Curiosity

Curiosity and creativity are key to developing new ideas and creating a culture that supports the ongoing innovation demanded by a rapidly evolving context. In late 2017, NILC continued to experiment, hiring a digital director and creating an even more robust series of online tactics and actions for supporters to take. Now NILC has one of the largest online presences in the immigrant rights sector with more followers on Twitter and Facebook than many other more widely-known groups in this same space.

Organizations can carve out space to celebrate experimentation and even failure, especially if these failures provide valuable lessons for the future. Failure is difficult, but it is an inevitable outcome of experimentation. Traditional methods of engagement, mobilization, and fundraising will eventually become obsolete, and organizations risk leaving potential power and fundraising potential untapped if they do not create a space where staff are able to bring their ideas to the fore in a way that celebrates experimentation.

Together, integration, trust and curiosity create the conditions that enable staff to spring into action when presented with a galvanizing opportunity.

The NILC and ICIJ stories demonstrate that preparing for and following up on a "lightning in a bottle" moment is as critical to an organization's success as the viral moment itself. In fact, if organizations can build a culture of integration, trust and curiosity, a lightning in a bottle moment may yield a richer and stronger community than once thought possible. ●



PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE: APPLYING THE IDEAS FROM THE CASE STUDIES TO YOUR WORK

PLANNING

🚀 **Balance thoughtful planning with agile adaptation.** Annual planning can save you from panic. Having a clear work plan frees you up to seize unforeseen opportunities. Luck favors the prepared, but the nimble are rewarded, too.

🚀 **Integrate annual communications and development planning and connect them to advocacy and organizing plans.** Collaborate with colleagues around policy priorities, campaigns and fundraising events. Consider a joint calendar to flag events that require coordination. Don't forget "time limited" campaigns. For example, if your organization does an annual "end of year" giving appeal, put that on the communications workplan and calendar. "Giving Tuesday?" Add that. Fostering coordination between functions bolsters your campaigns and ensures efficiency, alignment and better communications with supporters.

🚀 **Create the conditions in advance so you don't leave money and power on the table when lightning strikes.** Setting clear fundraising and communications priorities in advance lays the groundwork for seizing unexpected opportunities. In the years before the Trump election, NILC made concrete decisions to prioritize raising more money from individuals, develop leaders as go-to spokespersons, and cultivate relationships with reporters. These steps were key to creating the conditions and container for leveraging "lightning in a bottle."

STORYTELLING

🚀 **Let people at the heart of the work speak for themselves.** Amplify their stories. For example, ICIJ's social media not only featured "official" staff and coalition spokespersons, but also immigrant community members. While encouraging "multiple voices" can present risks (like people going "off message"), the authenticity of diverse voices is powerful.

🚀 **Spotlight compelling personal stories that humanize systemic problems.** NILC created its "Thank You, Martin" campaign, and ICIJ lifted up the story of Alex and Wilson, the courageous brothers imprisoned under miserable conditions. By centering individuals, and framing how their stories have consequences to many more people, NILC and ICIJ spotlighted injustice against all immigrants in a way that wasn't overwhelming to supporters and gave them ways to make a difference, even with smaller donations.

🚀 **Use multiple channels.** Experiment with social media and digital fundraising platforms such as GoFundMe, as well as video, photos and social media posts, to keep stories in front of supporters, show what happened as a result of their actions or donations, and prompt how much more needs to be raised.

MESSAGING

🚀 **Messaging and framing are critical components of fundraising strategy.** Your messaging should include donors as an audience focus, with an appeal to their generosity and their solidarity in taking action. Deepen their connection to your mission by inviting them to do more than writing a check. Engage them in organizing and advocacy efforts, for example, by offering them the opportunity to reach out to others in their community and beyond by writing a letter to a representative, signing a congratulations book, posting a story, tweet, or sharing on Facebook.

🚀 **When lightning strikes, let supporters know what they can do.** After the Trump Muslim ban, with public outrage surging, NILC let supporters know what they could do and where they could give. And then they followed up to learn more about new donors and build relationships.

⚡ **Data is your friend.** NILC used data and testing to learn about new supporters. Open rates, click rates, donation rates and other metrics were analyzed to increase awareness about what messages worked best in reaching donors. Data and message testing are important tools for your fundraising efforts and help reap repeat donations.

⚡ **Write clear appeals** with offers such as matches, deadlines, shortfalls, what happens if you don't give, you'll love how you feel when you give, people like us give. Use action words and show what the impact will be of the donation: "Your donation will pay for busses to the state capitol."

⚡ **Anyone can be a donor.** Give all your supporters—members, friends, allies and funders—opportunities to donate. NILC and ICIJ don't assume all donors are English-speaking or wealthy. Example: ICIJ's executive director, during an interview on Spanish-language radio, invited listeners to text "apoyo" (support) to a phone number to help out, eliciting small contributions from around the country that added up to meaningful amounts.

⚡ **Remember it's not just what you say but what they hear**, so communicate in a way that excites, engages and compels donors to give, using easy-to-understand language. Example: NILC shifted from a lawyerly "explainer" communications mode in its member newsletter after open rates confirmed it was less effective than shorter emails and messages that offered people clear, meaningful action (See [pages 10 and 11](#) for examples).

DONOR ENGAGEMENT AND APPRECIATION

⚡ **Follow up and get to know new supporters.** Engage and deepen relationships with donors and supporters acquired in a lighting moment so you don't lose them and build and sustain a relationship over time.

⚡ **Don't forget to thank supporters and celebrate success.** Congratulate your supporters and members on work well done and recognize their contributions. For example, ICIJ held a live video celebration when the brothers were finally released from detention. Keeping people hopeful and galvanized with moments of joy is crucial to building community and engaging members as change agents and donors, not victims.

ATTITUDE AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

⚡ **Fundraising is an organization-wide endeavor, not one person's responsibility.** It takes commitment, trust and coordination at all levels, as well as institutional investment. Executive leadership helps set the tone and communicates trust in staff to take risks and innovate. At NILC, the executive director and board set a goal to diversify revenue. Senior communications and development staff created new systems to collaborate. At ICIJ, the executive director fostered a spirit of "radical inclusion" among staff and advocates, which meant all voices and authentic representation of ICIJ's constituency were included. These approaches were core to NILC and ICIJ's identities and integrated into their fundraising strategies.

⚡ **Test and learn.** You have to experiment to adapt to new opportunities. ICIJ and NILC took risks, but had a system to analyze and learn from them, including data analysis. ICIJ's car rallies instead of traditional marches at a time of COVID social distancing is a good example of pivoting when one idea is no longer viable.

⚡ **It's fun. It's joyous. Believe it. Demonstrate it.** Others will catch the vibe and follow you. You can find ways to raise money that are aligned with your mission and values. There isn't a "bad time" to fundraise. Despite the COVID pandemic and a hostile environment of political attacks on immigrants, ICIJ and NILC have continued to ask donors for money—changing their tactics to respond to changing realities. Raising money can be empowering, and it gives you the resources to accomplish your goals.

It's fun. It's joyous. Believe it. Demonstrate it. Others will catch the vibe and follow you.



LIGHTNING IN A BOTTLE CASE STUDIES: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Both NILC and ICIJ experienced unexpected opportunities created by political changes, in this case attacks by the Trump Administration on immigrants. Their challenge was to **seize the opportunity and leverage it for deeper, more sustainable gains.**

Identify at least one similar moment your organization has experienced—political, cultural, media—in the past year or two. Using the NILC and ICIJ experiences as models, how did or could you have leveraged the moment for raising money or taking action?

2. Central to the success of NILC and ICIJ is the **greater integration of communications, development, and organizing/advocacy efforts.** Every team member had a role, including the executive director and those directly affected by the issue. This coordination is not something all organizations do on a regular basis, and it's not something that "just happens." It requires trust.

In your organization, how would you describe this level of coordination, and what would you do to strengthen it?

3. Experimentation is a consistent theme in both studies. **Taking risks, being curious and open to trying new things, and thinking outside the box.** The organizations tried a variety of approaches, including social media and giving platforms and technologies such as GoFundMe, Venmo and SMS; video; data and metrics analysis and even a drag-themed brunch. Often they juggled the need to raise money urgently with the need to take chances and learn. This often required a level of culture change within the organization.

Discuss your own comfort level with experimentation. What would facilitate more outside-the-box thinking at your organization?

4. **Expand the role of your donors.** Both studies illustrate the importance of expanding messaging to supporters. This includes engaging with donors as more than check writers and inviting them to take other actions. It also can include inviting grassroots constituents to make small donations.

In your experience, what messaging resonates with financial supporters and what communication tactics effectively transmit that message? How could you invite your donors to take other actions?

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This project was commissioned by the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund and the LeadersTrust, in collaboration with NEO Philanthropy, to lift up insights on leadership and movement building and serve as a resource for leaders who are creating a world that is loving, sustainable and just.

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