

A conversation with David Bennion, November 7, 2016

Participants

- David Bennion – Executive Director, Free Migration Project
- Alexander Berger – Program Officer, U.S. Policy, Open Philanthropy Project

Note: These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Mr. Bennion.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Mr. Bennion of the Free Migration Project (FMP; <https://freemigrationproject.org>). The Open Philanthropy Project granted FMP \$24,000 in May 2016 to support its strategic planning process, as part of the Open Philanthropy Project's work to support organizations that promote freer migration on humanitarian grounds. Conversation topics included FMP's activities so far, future priorities, and sources of funding.

Activities

In order to spend more time on FMP, Mr. Bennion is no longer taking on new clients and is ending his current commitments where it can be done ethically. This is going more slowly than he would like (asylum cases can last several years), so he has spent around half his time on legal casework this month.

Mr. Bennion has been thinking about strategic issues and discussing them with others. However, his focus so far has been on programmatic work, including:

- A seminar on open borders
- A family detention campaign
- A campaign supporting immigrant restaurant workers

Open borders seminar

FMP and the Institute for Humane Studies (IHS) co-sponsored a seminar in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on November 5, 2016 entitled Opening the Borders: Free Movement, Free People. Around 70 people attended in the morning; most were college students, though some activists and others also came. Speakers included Alex Nowrasteh of the Cato Institute and Niloufar Khonsari, who runs a legal services NGO. There were also some breakout sessions and attendees were able to actively engage with the issues throughout the day. The goal was to generate conversation, and hopefully develop lasting connections among those interested in this topic.

Mr. Bennion believes it went fairly well, and that conversations like this are important. There was a diversity of opinions but attendees were generally receptive

to the idea of open borders, or at least not openly antagonistic. IHS collected feedback at the end of the day from around 30 participants (who were probably the more engaged ones). Mr. Bennion also gathered email addresses in order to start his organizational email list; he believes people who signed up for that are probably eager to hear how they can become more involved.

Family detention campaign

The Berks County Residential Center in Pennsylvania is one of three facilities in the U.S. where immigrant and asylum-seeking families are detained. There has recently been more pressure at the state level for the center to close, with engagement from faith groups and immigrant advocacy groups.

Mr. Bennion believes open borders and family detention are more closely connected than they may at first seem. This is illustrated by three connected actions in the Bring Them Home campaign, led by the National Immigrant Youth Alliance.

Advocacy on the border

U.S. practitioners are increasing advocacy efforts on the Mexican side of the border, often working directly with migrant shelters and other entities. This is a relatively new phenomenon; it is similar to what Mr. Bennion and a couple other lawyers were doing in 2013-14, but much more organized and permanent.

Plans

Aside from programmatic work, the main priority now is completing the start-up process so that FMP can become sustainable. This will likely require hiring another staff member.

FMP is not envisioned as a think tank per se. It is likely to have public education and theoretical elements, but Mr. Bennion does not think that is the best way to engage immigrant communities and activists. That is done more effectively through projects that gain visibility for the issue and directly affect people's lives. The general plan is therefore to continue focusing on programmatic activities, such as litigation and support for grassroots groups.

Next week there is a conference in Nogales, Mexico, where Mr. Bennion will talk to migrant shelter workers and directors. Events like this may be a sign that a sort of border advocacy network is emerging. The conference is a good opportunity to connect with others, gauge opinions about open borders, and solicit ideas for intermediate next steps.

Funding

FMP has not yet written any other grant applications. Other likely sources of income include:

- Large donors (though Mr. Bennion is wary of relying too heavily on foundations).
- The immigration legal community, in which he has a network.
- Small donors, e.g. through the website and seminars.

All Open Philanthropy Project conversations are available at <http://www.openphilanthropy.org/research/conversations>