

Free Migration Project Planning Funding Proposal

To: Alexander Berger, Open Philanthropy Project, U.S. Policy Program Officer
From: David Bennion, Free Migration Project, Director

Overview: I am an immigration attorney based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. On March 7, 2016, I incorporated Free Migration Project as a nonprofit immigration policy advocacy organization. The mission of Free Migration Project is to advocate for the right of all people to freely migrate. I wish to apply for funding from the Open Philanthropy Project to engage in a planning and visioning process during Free Migration Project's start-up phase. This process will involve soliciting feedback from immigrant rights organizers and migration policy thinkers, identifying and analyzing potential obstacles to the organization's mission, and formulating broad-stroke strategies based on that feedback and analysis. This planning process will assist Free Migration Project in navigating the start-up period, increase the probability of mission success, and help the Open Philanthropy Project determine whether additional funding would further its own objectives.

Proposed Timeframe of Planning Process: May 15, 2016, to November 15, 2016.

Background: An estimated 11 million undocumented people live in the U.S. Additional millions of noncitizens in the U.S. are at some risk of deportation. Hundreds of millions of people around the world would potentially emigrate to improve their economic situation or escape oppression, but are prevented from doing so by the restrictive immigration regime ("closed borders") which now prevails in all developed countries. Even for noncitizens who are relatively free to travel in and out of a country, persistent barriers to citizenship impede recognition of full membership in society and represent an important element of the international closed borders immigration regime. Pervasive restrictions on migration constitute a massive and unjustifiable hindrance to global economic development and individual liberty.

In the U.S., restrictionist policies implemented in the 1980s and 1990s were catalyzed by the 9/11 attacks, resulting in record numbers of deportations under Republican and Democratic presidents. Anti-immigrant sentiment surged in the post-9/11 period, resulting in legislative efforts to further penalize unauthorized migrants and restrict future immigration flows on the national level (2005-2006) and state level (2010-2011). In 2009, undocumented youth organizers began to mobilize around the DREAM Act, a federal bill that would provide legal status to some undocumented people who came to the U.S. as children. By "coming out" publicly as undocumented and engaging in aggressive direct action, these organizers pushed the Obama administration to grant formal relief and work authorization to undocumented young people in 2012, and then to expand informal protection from deportation to a larger group of undocumented immigrants in 2014.

Meanwhile, traditional immigrant advocacy organizations—backed primarily by organized labor, faith groups, and ethnic organizations—lobbied for passage of comprehensive immigration reform, an unwieldy policy mix of stricter border enforcement, legalization of 40-60% of existing undocumented immigrants, and expansion of certain guestworker programs. However,

the rise of the right wing of the Republican Party and increased polarization in the electorate doomed the comprehensive reform effort in Congress. By mid-2014, the bill was widely acknowledged to be unpassable.

Given hostility to immigration reform in Congress and a public which is increasingly divided on the issue, lobbying efforts led by a bipartisan elite which had quietly produced results in past decades were no longer successful. At the same time, a bipartisan consensus had formed around the need for an airtight border and aggressive internal enforcement. The failure of legislative reform, coupled with bipartisan commitment to enforcement, led a nominally pro-immigrant Democratic administration to deport immigrants in record numbers. The immigrant-youth-led grassroots movement adapted its policy demands and tactics to fit the political environment, resulting in incremental but substantial administrative policy changes. The grassroots movement achieved many of its goals in part because it was led by undocumented people themselves, who were attuned to the needs and capabilities of the community and motivated to use unorthodox methods. The organizers adopted tactics from the LGBT and Black civil rights movements, such as “coming out” to friends, family, and the public and risking deportation by engaging in civil disobedience actions. Their resulting visibility activated supporters, eventually leading to a tipping point where undocumented youth have achieved near-universal support on the left. The grassroots organizers also used human rights rhetoric to promote their cause, avoiding technical economic arguments. Accordingly, they expanded their policy demands beyond the DREAM Act, beginning to sketch out an ambitious but still somewhat undefined conceptual framework.

As an immigration attorney working with low-income immigrants in the Northeastern U.S. for the last 10 years, I have seen firsthand the suffering caused by closed borders. Frustrated with the repetitive and intractable nature of the problems my clients faced, I connected with undocumented bloggers and organizers in 2008. I assisted undocumented organizers around the country to stop deportations of their peers, advocate for the DREAM Act, engage in civil disobedience and prison infiltration campaigns, and bring people back to the U.S. in cross-border protest actions. Adding to my knowledge of U.S. immigration law, by working with undocumented organizers, I gained an understanding of the politics of immigration policy. I became connected to a national network of organizers and activists. In 2011, I left the nonprofit legal services organization I worked at in order to have more freedom to provide support to organizers and to prepare for an eventual transition to full-time advocacy. However, the loose and somewhat volatile nature of the organizing network, along with the demands of representing nearly 200 clients at any given time, hindered my ability to effectively advocate for far-reaching policy solutions.

In 2013, I connected to an emerging online network of scholars, businesspeople, and advocates that has coalesced around the [Open Borders website](#). Many of the community’s members are not affiliated with either major political party. The community is developing a robust and coherent theory of free migration (“open borders”), a set of policies which place the burden on the government to restrict migration rather than on the intending immigrant to justify entry. I began blogging occasionally for the Open Borders site, and in 2015 met other members of the open borders community in person. However, the open borders community currently has little overlap with the grassroots immigrant rights movement.

My goal in forming Free Migration Project is to facilitate dialogue between the open borders and immigrant rights movements in order to better promote open borders policies and more explicitly define immigration as a human rights issue. In collaboration with Free Migration Project's newly-formed board, I hope to work with members of both those groups to further Free Migration Project's mission and shift the [Overton Window](#) towards open borders policies.

Elements and Activities:

- Survey and interview immigrant rights activists and organizers to assess their views about free migration and their organizing needs relating to the issue.
- Survey and interview free migration (“open borders”) theorists and advocates to assess their thoughts and suggestions about free migration advocacy and activism.
- Formulate and attempt to answer “big picture” questions that present the most serious challenges to free migration policies and open borders advocacy. For example:
 - How can the divide between libertarians and activists on the left be bridged on immigration policy? While both groups are potentially supportive of free migration, their policy goals often diverge on the subject of labor mobility and political integration of immigrants. How can we productively engage organized labor and proponents of guestworker programs in support of free migration policies?
 - The immigrant community in the U.S. is divided along lines of immigration status, race, nationality, and income. For example, H-1B and F-1 visa holders generally have little contact with undocumented blue-collar workers who crossed the border without a visa. How can we promote solidarity across immigrant groups to better advocate for free migration?
 - The biggest group of potential beneficiaries of free migration policies remains outside of developed countries, unable to migrate. How can we engage people who have left the U.S. or who have never migrated? How can we persuade people inside the U.S. that those outside of the U.S. deserve protections and rights, just as U.S. immigrant communities do?
 - Given the spread of small, unpredictable acts of violence motivated by political factors, free migration policies present legitimate concerns about safety and security in receiving countries. In addition, unauthorized migration is often highly dangerous for migrants. Large numbers of new migrants can produce a backlash that leads to state or private violence against migrant communities. How can open borders be reconciled with the safety and security concerns of receiving countries and of migrants themselves?

Total requested amount: \$24,000

Attachments:

- Sample blog posts:
 - [How Dreamers Pushed Harry Reid to Victory in 2010, and What This Means for Obama in 2012](#), *Citizen Orange*, December 20, 2010.
 - [AP's Argument that “Illegal” Is More Accurate than “Undocumented” Doesn't Hold Water](#), *Citizen Orange*, September 25, 2012.

- [In 2013, the Dream 30 Fought to Come Home](#), *OpenBorders.Info*, December 30, 2013.
- [Executive Action, Not Legislative Reform, Is How U.S. Immigration Policy Gets Made Now](#), *OpenBorders.Info*, November 25, 2014.