

LOCAL

Salem advocate earns rare credential to defend immigrants in court

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A Salem employee of [Lutheran Community Services Northwest](#) has become the organization's first fully accredited representative and one of the few fully accredited representatives in the state, allowing her to represent clients in more ways when they navigate immigration matters.

Jessica Jennings, who works with Lutheran Northwest Community Services' Safe Route Immigration Program, previously held partial accreditation through the [U.S. Department of Justice](#).

DOJ accreditation authorizes a non-lawyer to represent people in immigration legal matters. Non-attorneys must work for a recognized nonprofit organization that provides immigration legal services to low-income and indigent people.

Those with a "partial" accreditation may represent people only before U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, a federal agency under the Department of Homeland Security. Fully accredited representatives may represent individuals before both USCIS and the Executive Office for Immigration Review, which includes immigration courts and the Board of Immigration Appeals.

Oregon, according to a U.S. Department of Justice [report](#) last updated Sept. 13, has 14 recognized organizations with accredited representatives. Just five of those organizations have at least one fully accredited representative.

The report lists 11 fully accredited representatives in Oregon, 7 of them with Portland's Innovation Law Lab.

Jennings' new full accreditation expands the cases she can handle, allowing the Salem office to expand services to asylum and deportation defense in immigration court.

Jennings, an Oregonian since she was 13, told the Statesman Journal she has spent the past year training for the accreditation in addition to her full-time responsibilities at the Salem office. She's shadowed attorneys in Portland, Vancouver and Seattle and met regularly with a mentor attorney.

"With all the changes happening, I think we're all having to invest a lot of time in learning," Jennings said.

The expanded credential comes as the Salem office and organizations across Oregon work to respond to growing demand for immigration services. Jennings already has more than 200 open cases and conducts several consultations a week. She's forced to limit her caseload to provide adequate representation.

"There are private attorneys, but the costs are really high," Jennings said. "It makes it really challenging for those individuals to find representation."

President Donald Trump's crackdown on immigration meant more than 1,800 arrests in Oregon in 2025 and more than 700 in 2026, according to [data released in August](#).

Jennings said one benefit of full accreditation is being able to continue representing existing clients if their cases move into immigration courts. Jennings, for example, works with people who are on parole and those with Temporary Protected Status, who may face the possibility of deportation proceedings.

TPS protections, for example, ended for more than [330,000 Haitians in the United States in early August](#). And thousands of immigrants from El Salvador face

uncertainty about their own protections. The federal administration has ended temporary protected status for immigrants from 13 of 17 countries with Temporary Protected Status designations.

"I want people to have a safe place in the community that's also affordable or accessible for them to have those resources in Salem," Jennings added. "I can't guarantee the results, but I can do my best to try (and) help you feel safe, understand what your rights are, and be with you step by step as things are challenging and complicated and scary."

Alma Jean, Safe Route program director, said in a statement the organization was "extremely proud" of Jennings and her full accreditation.

"It took great effort and courage, especially during this period when it is difficult to protect clients in immigration court. Jessica has embraced the challenge," Jean said.

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