

# IRAP

International Refugee  
Assistance Project

**2019 REPORT TO  
SUPPORTERS**



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

Note: The content of this Report is current as of  
October 2019. For the security and privacy of clients,  
some of the names in this Report have been altered  
or omitted.

# Letter From the Director

John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation



Dear IRAP Community,

We are putting out this Report in a complicated time marked by the need for bold action and critical reflection. In the past two years, IRAP has reached many important milestones in our efforts to create and protect pathways to safety for refugees and other forced migrants, and we are incredibly proud of all that we have achieved on behalf of our clients. But in the same time period,

the global refugee resettlement regime has reached the brink of collapse. Countries with longstanding traditions of welcoming those fleeing violence and persecution are not only closing their doors, they are, in many instances, engaging in targeted acts of oppression against those who arrive at their borders seeking asylum.

It is clear that a coordinated and creative response is critically and urgently necessary to protect and defend the rights of refugees and asylum seekers around

the globe. That response must balance a realistic assessment of the severity of the current geopolitical climate for migrants with an informed, strategic, and determined optimism that there are decisive measures we can take to fight back against xenophobia and discriminatory policies.

This is what IRAP does. Rather than backing down as countries threaten to close their borders, we are scaling up our programs to ensure that displaced people have the tools they need to access their rights and reach safety. We are innovating new strategies and initiatives to counter the dangerous wave of anti-immigrant policies and sentiment, including launching programming to reunite separated families, expanding our reach to Europe to assist the vast refugee populations there, and deploying legal aid resources to the southern border of the United States.

“Rather than backing down as countries threaten to close their borders, we are scaling up our programs to ensure that displaced people have the tools they need to access their rights and reach safety.”

We are leveraging family reunification programs in Europe and the United States to bring our *pro bono* work to scale and keep families together. We can use these pathways to continue moving people from unsafe countries to safer ones, even as traditional resettlement avenues and asylum routes are closing. At the same time, we continue to help people move through resettlement pathways wherever possible, so that when the time comes to fully rebuild these passages, we are ready.

In Greece, we are engaging in capacity-building work with local organizations providing legal assistance to refugees stranded there, with the goal of developing a network of lawyers in Europe to create broad international change in the field of refugee legal aid.

We are responding to the humanitarian crisis at the U.S. southern border by challenging new policies in court that aim to restrict the rights of those arriving there. Our litigation team has recently filed its first lawsuit against the Trump Administration’s attacks on the right to seek asylum, and we are exploring new ways to extend our model to leverage *pro bono* legal volunteers from nearly 100 of our partnering law firms to assist asylum seekers in detention.

One of the first steps in expanding our work has been the establishment of IRAP as an independent 501(c)(3) organization in December 2018. Our new status as a standalone organization allows us increased flexibility to further the impact of our work and reflects our leading role on the global stage in advocating for the rights of refugees and other migrants. Our growth as an organization would not be possible without our amazing community of supporters.

Although challenges remain, we see hope in the reunited families who can embrace after years of separation; in the children who are able to return to school; and in individuals who, after decades of flight and displacement, can finally practice their faith openly, live their gender identity freely, and litigate for their rights in courts of law.

We are privileged to be able to get up every day and passionately engage in this work on behalf of some of the most unrelentingly hopeful human beings this world has to offer.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Becca Heller', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Becca Heller  
Executive Director, International Refugee Assistance Project



# Our Mission and Values

## MISSION

The International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) organizes law students and lawyers to develop and enforce a set of legal and human rights for refugees and displaced persons. Mobilizing direct legal aid, litigation, and systemic advocacy, IRAP serves the world’s most persecuted individuals and empowers the next generation of human rights leaders.

## VALUES

IRAP believes that everyone should have a safe place to live and a safe way to get there. To that end, we value action, accountability, innovation, and candor. We are nimble, collaborative, and nonpartisan. We believe in the power of individuals to change their own circumstances. And we believe in results.



# Our Model

IRAP’s innovative model mobilizes legal resources to advocate for people fleeing from war, hostility, and political upheaval around the world. In addition to legal, litigation, and policy work spearheaded from IRAP’s headquarters in New York, IRAP provides refugees with critical, on-the-ground assistance through field offices in Lebanon and Jordan.

Our approach is grounded in three distinct but interrelated strategies:

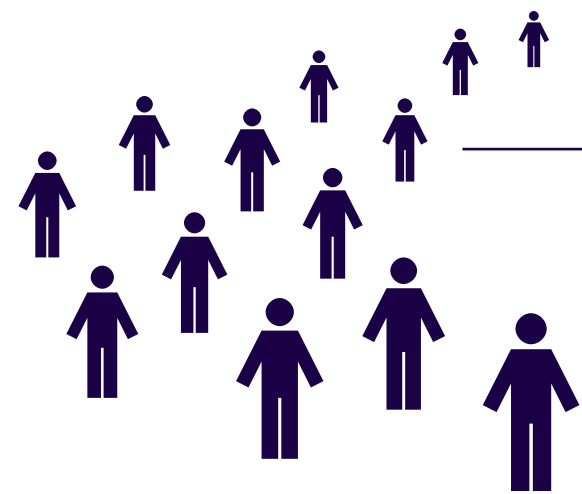
- 1 IRAP has created a virtual public interest law firm—a firm that is not impeded by geographic boundaries and uses technological solutions to deliver free high-quality legal aid to at-risk refugees and displaced people, leveraging a volunteer network of over 2,000 law students and *pro bono* attorneys.
- 2 Through impact litigation and systemic advocacy, IRAP is bringing legal challenges to refugee rights violations in the courts, creating solutions to overcoming the legal and bureaucratic impediments in the resettlement process, and developing an enforceable system of legal and procedural rights for refugees and displaced people worldwide.
- 3 By offering service learning opportunities through our legal aid model, IRAP trains the next generation of human rights leaders. IRAP educates and mentors law school students on legal issues affecting refugees, provides them with vital hands-on experience, and empowers them to advocate for the human rights of vulnerable populations.



Our Impact

In the ten years of our existence, IRAP has grown to become a world leader in the legal treatment and resettlement of the world’s most vulnerable displaced people.

Since 2010, IRAP has:



Helped resettle over **4,200** refugees and displaced persons to **18** different countries

Provided legal assistance to over **28,000** individuals from **73** different countries



Played a leadership role in enacting **10+** pieces of Congressional legislation, creating life-saving visas and legal protections for over **170,000** displaced people, including for nearly **60,000** Afghans and Iraqis and their families whose lives are at risk because of their service to the U.S. government



Achieved litigation victories that stand to benefit approximately **40,000** migrants and brought pending court challenges that can positively impact over **100,000** individuals.





Photo Credit: Robert Franklin via South Bend Tribune

## Reuniting separated families in Europe

Millions of refugees and other migrants fleeing violence undertake treacherous journeys to seek safety in Europe. Since 2014, over 1.8 million individuals have been granted refugee status, subsidiary protection, or humanitarian status in Europe. However, many are separated from family members who are still living in dangerous conditions. As such, there are potentially hundreds of thousands of migrants who may have the right to join their family members through European family reunification programs, but who face challenges navigating the complex legal processes necessary to apply to the various programs.



Photo Credit: Robert Franklin via South Bend Tribune

To respond to this tremendous unmet need for legal aid, IRAP has launched pilot programs that will reunite displaced individuals residing in Greece, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, and Libya with family members in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere.

## Our Legal Services

### Family Reunification as a Pathway to Safety

#### *Reuniting separated families in the United States*

It is a universal value that families belong together. Family-based immigration is a core component of many countries' immigration programs, including the United States. Yet, current U.S. policies and practices inspired by anti-immigrant sentiment threaten to close the doors to the United States for displaced people who have risked everything and endured grievous hardship, including separation from their families, to pursue the promise of safe haven on U.S. shores. To better confront this challenge, IRAP works to identify all viable

pathways to safety for forced migrants, including through family reunification programs.

In December 2017, IRAP won a major court ruling that blocked an Executive Order banning refugees from 11 countries from coming to the United States and suspending family reunification processing for refugees. IRAP has built upon this court victory by partnering with other organizations to develop legal aid clinics across the United States, in order to leverage our *pro bono* network to identify and assist individuals with family reunification claims. We also partnered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Asylum Access in Malaysia on a pilot project to help Rohingya refugees reunite with relatives in the United States.







### Client Testimony: Micheline’s Story

Micheline lived with her husband Basel and toddler son in war-torn Syria, where they were surrounded by daily shelling and suicide attacks on their neighborhood. They personally witnessed some of these attacks, leaving their family traumatized. The security situation was so terrible at the time that Micheline and Basel, who suffers from chronic thrombosis, could not reach the hospital. Basel’s condition worsened during that time, leading him to near death. His condition required surgery and medication that are not available in Syria and that are extremely costly in Lebanon, where they sought help. Time was of the essence and the family was desperate to travel to a safe place.



IRAP took on their case in November 2017 and successfully helped them relocate to France six months later through the Humanitarian Corridors program, an initiative organized by French and Italian faith-based organizations and local communities, in cooperation with the Italian and French governments. Micheline and her family now live safely in France where her son goes to kindergarten and is already fluent in French.

### In the Field

IRAP’s field teams in Beirut, Lebanon and Amman, Jordan deliver frontline assistance to displaced people seeking refuge. Our field offices are strategically located to reach the huge number of refugees displaced from neighboring countries such as Syria and Iraq. Our field teams include lawyers and caseworkers who work directly with clients to help them navigate the resettlement process, prepare them for resettlement interviews, and advocate on their behalf in front of organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration.

To deepen the scope of our impact, our field staff has built a network of partnerships with local organizations to establish referral systems that connect IRAP to individuals in need of legal aid and allow us to refer our clients to vital social services, including education, health care, psychosocial support, and shelter. Our field offices also play a key role in developing the capacity of our referral partners by providing in-person trainings to organizations on how to effectively assist at-risk clients. Finally, our field teams work with international partners to connect highly vulnerable clients to complementary pathways to safety—legal means through which forced migrants in exceptional circumstances can access safe countries outside of traditional refugee resettlement—such as the Humanitarian Corridors program, which relocates individuals to Italy and France.

### What’s Next For IRAP’s Legal Team?

Looking ahead, IRAP is scaling up our work and expanding our reach to help separated families reunite around the globe, from the southern border of the United States to the shores of Greece and North Africa. We will partner with frontline, grassroots organizations, training them to provide legal assistance to migrants and bolstering their capacity to reach more people in need. At the same time, we will continue to expand our operations, deploying our growing network of *pro bono* attorneys to provide legal assistance and harnessing the power of our student chapters to advocate for the rights of forced migrants.



# Our Policy Department

## Protecting Our Wartime Allies

The United States’ presence in Iraq and Afghanistan has relied on the life-saving assistance of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans who put themselves in danger to serve alongside U.S. troops, diplomats, and contractors. Many of these allies face threats, persecution, and violence as a result of their service and are eligible to apply to

the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program, which offers a pathway to safety in the United States. However, the program is plagued by extensive application processing delays and uncertainty regarding the availability of visas to accommodate the number of applicants. Many of those who are eligible for these visas remain in danger and in a state of limbo for years.



Visa in 2014, in hopes of being resettled to the United States. When the long wait became unbearable, the family was forced to flee to Turkey. When they attempted to cross the sea from Turkey to Greece, the boat capsized. Ghulam and his young son survived, but his wife and two other children disappeared into the water and have been missing ever since.

In this moment of immense tragedy, Ghulam reached out to IRAP to help move his case forward. IRAP helped to obtain the necessary documentation to bolster Ghulam’s application by reaching out to former supervisors and personnel who could confirm his employment history with the U.S. government. In October 2018, Ghulam and his son were resettled to safety in the United States. Earlier this year, they visited New York City for the first time.

## Client testimony: Ghulam’s Story

Ghulam’s case came to IRAP under the most tragic circumstances. He had been working as an interpreter for two contractors with the U.S. military in Afghanistan, where he successfully intercepted messages from the Taliban and foiled their planned attacks on local communities and banks. As a result of his work with the U.S. military, Ghulam became a major target of the Taliban and his children were often questioned regarding his whereabouts. Under constant threat and harassment, Ghulam applied for a Special Immigrant

Protecting the lives of our allies is not only a moral obligation, but also essential to national security. IRAP works to maintain and expand the availability of the SIV program, as well as to ensure fair processing for those seeking safety through the program.

Last year, IRAP helped lead the passage of Congressional legislation that created an additional 3,500 Special Immigrant Visas, and this year our team succeeded in securing the approval of 4,000 new visas in the FY19 U.S. spending bill, benefiting more than 23,000 U.S.-affiliated Afghans and their families. We are also working to ensure Congressional oversight for expeditious processing in the Direct Access Program that provides resettlement opportunities for Iraqis in similar situations. Improved processing stands to benefit approximately 100,000 Iraqis currently in the Direct Access Program pipeline.



## Fighting the Muslim Ban

In July 2018, the Supreme Court decided to uphold the Muslim ban for the moment.

Despite this disappointing ruling, there is still a huge amount of work to do to continue challenging the ban through the courts and advocating for its repeal. While the ban remains in place, we are working to ensure that individuals are able to access the waiver provisions in the ban. These waivers are intended to provide a process for individuals affected by the ban to travel to the United States. IRAP is advocating for reporting requirements on the waiver provisions, working in coalition with community organizations and other groups to ensure that waivers are issued in a more transparent way. Should this succeed, it would create openings for thousands of people to travel to the United States, despite the ban, until it can be repealed or rescinded.







## Law Students Advocate on the Hill

In February 2019, IRAP's policy team mobilized law students from IRAP chapters throughout the United States to gather in Washington, D.C. for IRAP's annual Advocacy Day. Students met with over 40 congressional offices and sought signatures from members of the House of Representatives on a bipartisan letter requesting information on the slowdown in the government's processing of SIV applications from Afghan and Iraqi allies.

On what she took away from her Advocacy Day experience, Ashley Lee, a 2L at Georgetown Law, said:



**"I appreciated being able to do my part in getting the plight of these refugees on the minds of lawmakers and possibly creating a pathway for positive change that will not only benefit the refugees but all of America."**



## What's Next for IRAP's Policy Team?

Our policy team will continue to advocate for legislation that opens pathways to safety in the United States for persecuted individuals abroad. In the face of increasing partisanship around immigration on Capitol Hill, our team is finding creative ways to partner with broad coalitions to push for systemic change that will benefit displaced people and to further galvanize a larger national movement for immigrants' rights. For example, our team has commented on many proposed administrative regulations that would limit access to asylum and regularly files Freedom of Information Act requests to expose government practices that are hostile to immigrants.





## Our Litigation Department

Over the past two years, IRAP has developed an in-house litigation shop to protect and expand migrant rights by challenging efforts of the current U.S. Administration to block pathways to safety for forced migrants. At the same time, we seek to increase transparency and hold the government accountable for its treatment of migrants. In doing so, we hope to empower historically marginalized immigrant communities with the tools they need to access their rights.

### Reuniting Central American Families

This year, IRAP’s litigation department won a historic court settlement that will allow approximately 2,700 children and other family members living in dangerous conditions in Central America to reunite with their families in the United States. The lawsuit challenged the Trump Administration’s termination of the Central

American minors (CAM) parole program, which offered children living in danger in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador a path to reunite with parents already living in the United States. The settlement requires the government to continue processing applications that were already conditionally approved at the time the program ended, which includes applications of children and of parents whose children have already traveled to the United States as refugees. We anticipate that the vast majority of these applications will subsequently be approved and IRAP is working on locating the families who could benefit from this case win. We have set up a hotline for families to receive information on how they can bring their children and other family members to the United States, and we are conducting outreach to organizations around the country that assisted families in filing CAM applications about the reopened pathway to safety.

### Client Testimony: Rosemary’s Story

“My family and I received a letter in August 2017, informing us that my mother’s CAM case was closed. I had arrived as a refugee through the CAM program in June 2017, but they would not be allowing my mother to join my father and me in the United States. Hearing that news was heartbreaking. I could not imagine my life here without my mother. I had already spent the last two years apart from her, and I was devastated.



My father and I didn’t give up hope. Despite hearing the news about the painful decision from the President of the United States closing the CAM parole program, we knew we had to fight to reunite our family.

Now, almost two years later, we are overwhelmed with joy by the news that my mother’s case will reopen.

Thanks to an agreement between IRAP and the government, my mother is coming to the U.S. to be with us. We won the battle—we can be a family again. I have dreamed of this day for so long! I will have my mother and father, and we will continue our lives together with hope and love. I couldn’t be happier.”

*“I want to thank IRAP and all of the other organizations who made this possible. Without you, none of this would have happened. Thank you for reuniting our family and other families. Thank you for never allowing us to give up hope.”*

— ROSEMARY SILVA PIMENTE (EL SALVADOR)

### Protecting Asylum Seeker Rights on the U.S. Southern Border

IRAP is challenging attempts by the U.S. government to unlawfully turn away asylum seekers arriving at the southern border of the United States. In June 2019, IRAP and the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES) filed a lawsuit challenging actions taken by the Trump Administration that make it more difficult during screening interviews for asylum seekers to demonstrate a “credible fear” of persecution if returned to their home countries. The Administration’s policies turn interviews into biased hearings, during which asylum officers are expected to find any reason possible that asylum seekers lack a “credible fear” and can therefore be immediately deported. IRAP is currently representing five plaintiffs who escaped life-threatening danger to seek asylum in

the United States and have been adversely impacted by the Administration’s policy changes. If we are successful in our challenge, our case will impact the conduct of all credible fear interviews, which could positively benefit thousands of asylum seekers fleeing threats and violence.



Protecting Religious Minorities  
Fleeing Persecution

In February 2018, the Trump Administration denied *en masse* the refugee applications of dozens of Iranians, despite applying through the Lautenberg-Specter program, which was created to provide safe haven for persecuted religious minorities. IRAP immediately sprung into action, filing a class action lawsuit on behalf of the Iranians and their U.S. family members. In July 2018, a U.S. District Court sided with plaintiffs and ordered the government to disclose individualized reasons for the mass denials, leading to subsequent approvals for many of the class members. To date, more than a dozen of them have been able to safely reunite with their family members and practice their religious beliefs without fear of persecution.



Fighting the Refugee Ban

Our groundbreaking win in our lawsuit against President Trump’s attempts to end the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program ensured that refugees will continue to be resettled to the United States. Together with our co-counsel, we secured a ruling in December 2017 that hindered the implementation of the latest refugee ban and ordered that refugee processing, including family reunification processing, resume globally.

What’s next for IRAP’s Litigation team?

In the coming year, our litigation team will continue to identify and bring cases against the U.S. government to fight actions that limit pathways to safety for displaced people. Our impact litigation has allowed us to expand our reach to new populations who previously might not have had access to our services, such as minors in Central America and asylum seekers detained in the United States. For example, in our new partnership with the Asylum Seeker Advocacy Project (ASAP) we will bring systemic litigation on behalf of asylum seekers and other forced migrants who have suffered abuses in detention, were separated from their families by the U.S. government, and whose due process rights have been systematically violated.

Challenging Delays in Processing of  
Afghan and Iraqi Allies

Following the creation of the Afghan and Iraqi Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) programs to provide legal pathways to safety for Afghan and Iraqi nationals who face persecution for assisting the U.S. government, Congress mandated that the United States should complete its processing of an SIV application within nine months of the application’s submission. Instead, thousands of applicants have experienced egregious processing delays, resigning them to a state of limbo as they wait to learn if they will be able to resettle to the United States in the face of ongoing threats to their safety.

In June 2018, IRAP and co-counsel filed a class action lawsuit challenging these processing delays on behalf of Afghan and Iraqi SIV applicants who have been waiting longer than nine months for the U.S. government to decide their applications. In September 2019, a federal judge ruled in favor of our plaintiffs and ordered the government to submit a plan for adjudicating these long-delayed applications, after the lawsuit uncovered the extent of the government’s failure to process applicants expeditiously.

Client Testimony: Goharek’s Story

Goharek is an Iranian-American who came to the United States as a refugee in 2000. Her brother and his family, all Armenian Christians, fled religious persecution in Iran via the Lautenberg-Specter program and waited in Austria for many months for their applications to be processed. Goharek’s brother, along with his wife and daughter, were finally admitted to the U.S. in September 2017; however, her 24-year-old nephew Tadeh’s application was denied “as a matter of discretion,” along with dozens of other Lautenberg applications. He was given no other reason for his denial.

Separated from his family and left behind in Austria, Tadeh’s future was uncertain, causing the family an immense amount of stress and suffering. Thanks to IRAP’s lawsuit, Tadeh’s application, along with those of all other class members, was reopened, and in February 2019 he was approved and traveled to the United States shortly thereafter. The family is relieved to be together again and to be able to practice their faith in safety.





# Our Inaugural Benefit: *IRAP Tonight with John Oliver*

On May 7, 2019, more than 700 supporters crowded the Rose Theater at Jazz at Lincoln Center’s Frederick P. Rose Hall in New York City for IRAP’s inaugural benefit, *IRAP Tonight with John Oliver*. The event gathered some of the most passionate defenders of refugee and human rights, including former IRAP clients, for a night filled with emotion, powerful and inspiring conversation, and big laughs.

Comedian John Oliver, host of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* and IRAP Advisory Board member, hosted the evening and, together with IRAP’s Executive Director Becca Heller, shined a light on the brave individuals who have fled their homes in search of freedom and safety. They also recognized the efforts of IRAP’s tremendous community helping them find a new, safe place to call home.

Later in the evening, IRAP presented the Portrait of Courage Award to Masooma Hussaini and Sourya Saleh, the first female Afghan pilots and former IRAP clients, in recognition of their long and difficult journey to safety and their efforts to advance women’s rights around the world. Masooma and Sourya were joined onstage by Joanna Coles, OBE, award-winning Executive Producer and Creative Advisor.

Following this riveting conversation, Carl Reisner, Partner at Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison LLP, and IRAP’s counsel and board member, was presented with IRAP’s Visionary Award for his invaluable service and unwavering support to IRAP. His dedication has played a pivotal role in the organization’s growth, development, and success over the years.

Comedians Wyatt Cenac of HBO’s *Wyatt Cenac’s Problem Areas* and John Oliver then delivered

gut-busting sets that craftily wove comedy into refugee advocacy and filled the truly iconic venue with exhilarating laughs. To cap off the night, Becca Heller and John Oliver joined together to encourage attendees to reflect on the evening’s discourse, champion the rights of vulnerable individuals around the world, and commit to engaging around this issue in their communities. John Oliver led by example and launched an Omaze fundraising campaign that would support IRAP by offering one lucky winner a chance to be featured on *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to our incredible community of supporters who joined us and contributed to the success of the evening, notably our benefit co-chairs, host committee, and sponsors. IRAP’s growth over the last decade would not have been made possible without our partners who have stood with us as we continue to break new ground in ensuring fair and humane treatment for those displaced around the world and advocate for the rights of refugees and displaced people in search of safety and security.

*“It looked like I was stuck in a very well dug hole that was so dark, that no matter how loud I screamed for help no one would help me [and] IRAP was the only one that came to help me.”*

— MASOOMA HUSSAINI



Rick Gilbert/Skyhook Entertainment for IRAP



# Our Supporters

IRAP extends profound thanks to our generous supporters this past fiscal year — September 1, 2018 to August 31, 2019.

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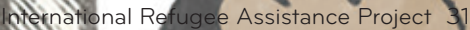
# IRAP, Inc.’s Financials

In 2008, IRAP was founded as a student-led extracurricular organization at Yale Law School and in 2010 we became a project of the Urban Justice Center, an umbrella social justice advocacy organization, which provided IRAP with essential infrastructure and services. In recent years, as IRAP developed an increased profile and reputation as a world leader on refugee issues, becoming a standalone organization was the natural next step. To that end, we are thrilled to share that, as of December 23, 2018, the International Refugee Assistance Project is officially an independent 501(c)(3) organization!

IRAP’s status as a standalone nonprofit marks an exciting new chapter for our organization as we continue to grow our work to assist displaced people around the world. Already in our first year as an independent organization, we have received high-level revenues from our supporters, raising over \$9 million to expand our life-saving programs. This reflects an increase in support of approximately \$4 million from our total operating revenues in Fiscal Year 2018, which has allowed us to grow our staff and programmatic capacity to meet the rising global need for our services. As part of our spinoff from the Urban Justice Center, we also moved into a new office, located at One Battery Park Plaza, 4th Floor, New York, NY 10004.

In late 2019, IRAP plans to have independently audited financial statements for the fiscal year ending August 31, 2019 prepared for publication. These financial statements, IRAP’s first as an independent organization, will reflect IRAP’s financial separation from UJC and 9 months of independent operation. These statements, along with IRAP’s 990 filings, will be available on our website.









International Refugee  
Assistance Project

## **About IRAP**

The International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) provides legal advocacy for refugees and displaced people in need of a safe place to call home. We work with our clients to identify and navigate pathways to safety through free direct legal representation, systemic advocacy, and litigation.

Everyone should have a safe place to live and a safe way to get there.