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## Trust Talks Episode #18: Supporting Our Immigrant Communities

**Ayom Siengo:** Welcome to Trust Talks. I'm Ayom Siengo, the Trust's Senior Director of Critical Needs. Today, we're diving into the vital work being done by community-based organizations to support immigrants and communities in our city.

We are joined by Ere Rendón, Vice President of Immigrant Justice at the Resurrection Project, and Fasika Alem, Programs Director at the United African Organization. Later, you'll also hear from Robert Quinn of the Quinn Family Fund, who sits on the Steering Committee of Illinois Immigration Collaborative, and Heather Steans, Board Chair of the Steans Family Foundation.

The Trust was founded as the Region's Community Foundation to respond to the urgent needs of our most vulnerable residents. We have been supporting immigrant-serving organizations since 1920, when the Trust made a \$500 grant to the Chicago Americanization Council. Most immigrants at that time came from Europe. The majority were from Germany and Ireland, and there were also large numbers of immigrants from Russia, Italy, and others.

More than 100 years later, we remain just as committed to helping our newest neighbors get settled and begin making a new, stable life for their families. In the first part of our conversation, we'll hear from local profit leaders who are on the front lines of this work. They'll share how recent policy changes have impacted the communities they serve, the misconceptions they'd like to correct, and the message they want to share with those who may not fully understand the realities faced by immigrant communities.

Let's get started. Please take a moment to introduce yourself and your organization.

**Fasika Alem:** Hello everyone. My name is Fasika Alem and as I was introduced before, I am Programs Director with the United African Organization, an UAO formed in 2005 really as a vehicle to advocate for the growing African immigrant community.

Today, in addition to policy advocacy and community organizing, the United African Organization offers direct services around immigration legal services, accessing safety net programs, language access, and workforce development to the Black immigrant community across the state.

**AS:** Thank you, Fasika.

**Ere Rendón:** Buenos Dias. My name is Ere Rendón. I'm the Vice President of Immigrant Justice at the Resurrection Project. I myself am also an immigrant. I'm a dreamer. I came to the U.S. when I was four years old to be able to be reunited with my dad.

For the last 12 years now, I've had DACA – Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals – and I get to do this work at The Resurrection Project, where we are able to increase access to legal services for immigrants. We're also able to work on expanding healthcare access and making sure that organizations across the city and the state are working collaboratively to be able to reach as many immigrants as possible.

**AS:** Thank you both, and again, welcome. The first question is how have recent changes in immigration policies, such as increased ICE enforcement, impacted the communities that you both serve?

**ER:** I think this time around, what is very clear is the overwhelming fear that exists in our communities. Fasika, I don't know if you feel that it's slightly different than the first time around. It definitely feels like there's an increased, almost paralyzed feeling, like our communities feel a little bit paralyzed right now. And not knowing what to do in terms of how you protect yourself, in terms of whether you should seek legal services. Should you apply for benefits if your children do qualify?

We're even seeing it at the very local level, with parents being afraid of taking their children to school. A lot of rumors are circulating on social media. And to me, what's really heartbreaking about this is I think immigrants come to the U.S. with a whole lot of hopes and dreams, regardless of the way that you get to the U.S., regardless if you have status or not.

My dad came in 1987, and my mom and my siblings and I came in 1990, and we've been undocumented this whole time. My parents have never had a work permit. I have DACA. Both my siblings remain undocumented. My mom and my dad actually never went to school in Mexico, but we came to the U.S., and my mom, three years after arriving, was able to buy our house.,

She put her children through college. Her children now have careers and can do that despite your immigration status. I think it is a lot more challenging, of course, to do it this way, but I think my biggest concern about what's happening now is it almost feels like this is a pretty good example of how you crush an entire community's ability to be able to dream.

I think that that is probably what's the most painful personally for me, and I hope it's temporary. And I think it's our job to make sure that, at the very least, the policy changes that we've been able to win in Illinois continue. And that we continue to work towards making Illinois and Chicago the most welcoming place and a place where you are able to dream. Even if right now it feels pretty overwhelming.

**AS:** Ere, thank you for bringing us so close to your personal story and the work that you do. Fasika, I have the same question for you. Again, how have recent changes in immigration policies, such as increased ICE enforcement, impacted the communities that you serve?

**FA:** Yes, I would echo what Ere said about the fear. And the fear is not just with folks who don't have status; it is community-wide. Those who have status are now also afraid to move around and live their lives with dignity. We're also seeing the expansion of detention and the removal of these protections, the temporary protected statuses and the parole statuses, having significant effects on our community.

For the Black immigrant community, we're talking about the potential of half a million Black immigrants across the country losing the ability to work legally, to stay in the United States legally, and expose them to detention and deportation. That is already an issue for Black and Brown immigrants who are criminalized in this country.

And for Black immigrants, we have some safety in the State of Illinois, but it's not a blanket safety. For Black immigrants, for example, they're three times more likely to end up in deportation because of contact with law enforcement. These issues continue to concern us.

But then we're seeing family separation, the end of the refugee program. The inability. The upcoming, as we expect, Muslim ban. These are efforts to separate families and cripple how people are able to live their lives fully. Those are some of the concerns that we have.

**AS:** As people consume information, especially news, sometimes the reporting can be one-sided. I'm curious if you might dig into some of the misconceptions about immigrants that you could frame for listeners.

**FA:** I think one is the idea that all immigrants come the same way. That all immigrants are categorized as one group. And there's variation to the journeys that immigrants take. For example, the Refugee Resettlement Program is a significantly important program for us.

For example, 25% of Black and Caribbean refugees or immigrants from African and Caribbean countries come as refugees, compared to 10% of the overall immigration population. So, this misconception that everybody's coming across the border. Or the idea that everybody, when people talk about immigrants now, it's lumping everybody to say, "Oh, everybody's unauthorized to be here or is illegal."

The terminology itself, I think, is problematic for us. Also, the idea that Black immigration to the United States is a recent phenomenon. I recently watched an amazing documentary where I learned that Black immigrants have been coming to this island since folks started coming to Ellis Island, something that I didn't know.

So, the idea that we are new immigrants or that we are too small to be concerned about. Today, one in 10 Black people is an immigrant or a child of an immigrant. So, there are misconceptions about who is an immigrant and who isn't. I'll pass it to you, Ere.

**ER:** Yeah, I'll add to that. One is I think there's a misconception that immigrants just got here. Immigrants are people like Fasika and me who have been here for a long time. I've been here for 35 years. In particular, in Illinois, in the undocumented community, we actually have been here an average of more than 15 years.

I think for undocumented immigrants, there is a misconception that you just get here and you're here for a little bit of time as undocumented, and you can eventually adjust your status. That's just not the reality for many folks. I think the folks think that there's a line. You hear a lot, "Get to the back of the line." But there's no line.

There's a line if the main way for folks to be able to come to the U.S. is through family-based sponsorship. If you have a U.S. citizen's family who's able to sponsor you, there's potentially a way to get in. But, depending on what country you're from, it would take about 15 to 20 years for that to happen.

And that's if you happen to have a family to sponsor you. Or even once you're here, I think there's this idea that you're choosing to be out of status. I am often asked why I don't apply for citizenship. And if I could, I would, but the laws as they're written at the federal level make it so that I don't have a way to be able to adjust my status.

I can come to the U.S. when I'm four years old. I can grow up here, I can go to college, go to school here, I can go to college here. I can buy a home here. I can make a career here. I can do all of that, but I cannot adjust my status because that is the way that the laws are written.

The laws are written right now almost in a way to continuously have a perpetually undocumented community. And unfortunately, right now, there's a large portion of folks who have been here and who are aging. I think that's another misconception, that all immigrants are sort of young, particularly for the undocumented community.

It's an aging community because folks have come here and then, once you leave, it's almost impossible to come back. Folks are getting to be older and are undocumented. And that means no Medicare, no Social Security, and no pensions. We're aging into poverty as well.

There's a misconception that we don't pay taxes. We absolutely do pay taxes. We actually are able to get what's called an ITIN number, an individual tax ID number. The government does know we're here and the government does collect our taxes. We pay into Social Security, and we cannot receive any of those benefits.

Obviously, right now, there's a huge misconception about crime and immigrants. But the reality is that immigrants are actually less likely to create crime. And then, in particular, something I think about a lot is that we think that the dreamer issue is fixed. That dreamers now all have DACA, and that's just not reality.

There are actually more undocumented students graduating from high school now every single year than when I graduated from high school. We're continuously having more and more dreamers who grew up here, who go to high school here, graduate, and then have almost no options for how to actually form a career. And there are a few of us who are lucky to have been able to do so, but a lot of folks just can't.

I often don't hear about the Dreamer situation anymore or that Dreamers need to have the Dream Act because there continue to be undocumented students. I think that those are just a few, and I could keep going on and on. I can make a list of 20 other misconceptions.

The main one is that we're a community. We're just people. There are good folks, bad folks, and folks who do all sorts of stuff. There are folks who work and moms who stay home, and we have the same challenges as everybody else. There's just this uniqueness to being an immigrant and to our status oftentimes as well.

**AS:** Let's stay here. What role, then, do you think cities like Chicago can play in setting an example for how communities welcome and support newcomers?

**ER:** Chicago has so many neighborhoods that are made up of immigrants, and I think that's really cool. You can go into Little Village and feel like you're stepping into Mexico. You can go to Devon Street and feel like you're stepping into India.

Folks are becoming homeowners and folks are able to be able to stay and thrive in Chicago. I think Illinois also has that role. I grew up in a small town by Wisconsin, still on the Illinois side. I think the role of the city and the state, for one, is to have really good policy.

I was able to go and be part of the first openly undocumented class to go to the University of Illinois, and that's because of good policy. I still had to pay my tuition in full, but it basically allowed me to be able to go to college and have a career, and that means good for me. That's something that's very good for me as an immigrant, but also very good for my community.

In Illinois, there are a lot of folks who we passed driver's licenses in 2012. That meant that when folks were driving, one, everybody had to pass a test to be able to drive. But it also meant people had more access to car insurance. It meant our roads were safer. It meant that every time my parents got pulled over or if they were in a car accident, they were no longer going to get arrested like they did when I was growing up, when they didn't have a driver's license.

I think having good policy is really, really important. The same thing with the Trust Act in terms of welcoming policies, which means that the local police don't ask for immigration status or cooperate with ICE, because the local police are here to protect the safety of everybody.

The other, I think, is making sure that we're investing in immigrant communities. As we mentioned, immigrants do pay taxes, and there's very few programs that undocumented can actually apply for. We don't qualify for almost every single federal program, and we don't qualify for most state programs.

We should be looking to see what we can qualify for, like healthcare for folks who are very low income. Then, making sure we're investing in things like legal services, which helps folks potentially adjust their status, which helps folks fight their deportation, helps folks become U.S. citizens. Those are all good for the immigrant, but also good for the community.

**AS:** Thank you, Ere. Fasika?

**FA:** Along similar lines, the policy piece is very important, making sure that immigrants are equally able to access resources. We think about the type of city, the type of state that we want to live in; we want it to be inclusive of everybody.

As we're pushing for policies around healthcare access or housing equity. The needs and the unique challenges that immigrant communities face should be included in those conversations. Chicago's doing a good job, but there's room for improvement in how we do those things.

And then it's also about making sure that immigrant communities are represented in different spaces. For us, this past year has been, 2024 at least, has been good in terms of wins around that. We were recently able to get representation within the Mayor's Office at the city level to have somebody that represented the voice of Black immigrants across the city, making sure that we are creating opportunities for representation and voices to be heard around policy issues, around accessing services, and the like.

**AS:** Thank you. Finally, as a call to action, and you've touched upon this a little bit, but curious if you want to share a final point on how individuals, communities, and policymakers can better support the work that you both are doing? I'll start with you, Ere.

**ER:** We get a lot of requests for volunteers, and we love volunteers, but volunteers take a lot of work. So, the absolute best thing anybody can do is to donate to organizations who do this work every single day. Donate in the entire space of what we have to do as immigrant-serving organizations. We have to provide service. We absolutely have to be on the ground making sure people have legal representation, or they're signing up for programs that they may qualify for.

Actually, that's probably where there's the most space to volunteer. And then there's space for us to be able to continue to develop that programming. We also have to make sure that we are doing a lot of leadership development and encouraging our folks to live a public and active public life. You can always provide expertise in terms of training for folks as we do this work, but also there's a funding need for that too in leadership development. And that's usually where the biggest gap I would say is always there.

In terms of getting active in public policy, I think following our organizations on social media and signing up for our listservs because we are always actively engaged in policy work at the state level, I would say the most, but also at other levels. And you could do things like witness slips to be proponents of good policy that we're trying to pass.

You can call your elected because we'll send out little take action notices to be able to support programs at the state level that help immigrants. That's actually something that you can continuously be taking action on. And right now is the right time to do it because session is happening right now in Springfield.

**AS:** Thank you, Ere. Fasika?

**FA:** What I would add to that is part of our work now and our focus now is really around narrative building and how we change the narrative about how we talk about immigration in this country and particularly across our state. So I think there's opportunity for individuals and community members to participate in dispelling these myths and misconceptions about immigrant communities and engaging in ways that they're also bringing others along with them.

Organizations like ours create opportunities to have these conversations. Where people can get a better understanding and talk about some of the things that we're talking about here. I'd encourage individuals and community members to engage in those opportunities and follow us to see what we're doing and maybe participate in some of those conversations that we're hosting in the community to help us do that.

**AS:** Thank you. As we wrap up this segment, I want to take a moment to reflect on what we've heard. The challenges faced by immigrants and communities in Chicago are deeply personal and often overlooked, but our immigrant and refugee communities are resilient, and the power of collective action is transformative. Thank you to our incredible guests for sharing their stories and insights. Ere and Fasika, your work is truly inspiring.

Now we're going to shift our focus to the role of philanthropy in supporting immigrant communities. Donors play a critical role in driving systemic change, and today we'll hear from two individuals who are using their resources and influence to make a difference. They'll share what inspired them to direct their philanthropic efforts toward this cause, how they measure the impact of their support, and why they believe it's critical for individuals with resources to step up at this moment in history.

Let's dive in. Please go ahead and introduce yourselves.

**Heather Steans:** I'm Heather Steans, I chair the Steans Family Foundation and have been also on the Board of the Chicago Community Trust.

**Bob Quinn:** I'm Bob Quinn. Susan and I have a Donor Advised Fund and we support local and national and global nonprofits. I'm a retired Fortune 100 executive and I'm on the Steering Committee of the Illinois Immigration Funder Collaborative.

**AS:** Heather and Bob, welcome. First, tell us how you've been supporting immigrants. What inspired you to direct your philanthropic efforts to support these issues? And how does this align with your broader philanthropic vision?

**HS:** So, I'll first tell you what we've been doing and then why we got into that. When we were making that contribution, we had four goals around what the work of the Unity Fund was going to be doing. One was to develop an overall plan for housing, both for new arrivals and for the unhoused Chicagoans. The second was to assist with immigration legal services. The third was to help fund the CBOs, like you've been hearing from Fasika's and Ere's organizations, that are providing essential services to immigrants. Lastly, to help The Chicago Community Trust lead and coordinate efforts with the government.

I used to be a state senator and I represented the most diverse district in the state of Illinois, and arguably I think it's one of the most diverse districts in the country. While I worked with these organizations and so appreciated what the immigrant population was bringing to our communities, I was really quite surprised by the number of constituents who called with vitriolic concerns about immigrants.

I truly was surprised that there was this mentality somehow that immigrants were detracting from the community rather than contributing to the community. I also, with some friends, sponsored a family from Afghanistan and just saw personally what effort is required to become, get all your legal papers to get integrated, to get jobs in an environment in which we should be welcoming them as they were immigrants that we sort of created.

And to see what happened then with governors in Texas and other places starting to send large numbers of immigrants to Chicago. It became just clear that there was a special moment in time where we really needed to be stepping up. My sisters and our husbands, and I very much wanted to help try to be part of a solution and try to help mitigate some of these concerns that we care deeply generally about issues of equity. And understanding that immigrants were such a valued part of the community that was now being so misunderstood and misrepresented in so many ways.

We felt like, in our case, it was not an area of expertise. Everyone has things that they really know deeply and things that they don't. I am not a recent immigrant, it's not the focus of our family foundation's work. So, from our viewpoint, partnering with the Unity Fund at the Trust was very natural.

They have lots of expertise that they were diving deeply into, and we could be funding work; we can help provide dollars and resources and know that they were going to be spending those dollars in ways that were going to be most advantageous. At the same time they could deal with immediate critical needs, they could also be dealing with systemic issues.

We've seen that play out, for example, when they were trying to come up with a plan for addressing both immigrants and Chicagoans. We've now been seeing those systems merge, for example, in the city of Chicago. It was very personally rewarding to be able to contribute to specific immediate needs, as well as address systemic challenges that we have.

**AS:** Heather, thank you so much for your support and thank you for that response. Bob, same question.

**BQ:** There's sort of an indirect answer and a direct answer. The direct answer of how I got involved, Susan and I got involved, in the immigration issues in Illinois. We were recent arrivals ourselves. We moved to the city a couple of years ago and concurrent with many, many folks who were bused here, flown here, the new arrivals that came from Texas and other parts of the country.

It was very consistent with our family giving priorities, which are to address humanitarian needs that are immediate. To work, be concerned about persistent inequities, policy failures that are happening in the country and around the globe. And even efforts to undermine rights that we're seeing legislatively in the courts. That's how we direct all our giving.

We responded as quickly as we could. And pretty fast, I learned about the Immigration Funder Collaborative here, which, by the way resides at the Trust and the Trust has been a terrific partner. And the Unity Fund is a terrific partner of the Trust. Both these organizations that you've heard from today are recipients of the Immigration Funder Collaborative, and it just came to us as a really logical way for us to address this on the ground.

Heather said it, I couldn't say it better. I'm not an expert. There are many folks that are on my Steering Committee with me that do have that expertise, but we understand that that's an effective way to reach the community.

On an indirect basis, I mentioned that I'm a retired executive from a Fortune 100 company. I saw every day the power of immigrants in the United States. We kind of forget about this. I personally remember, I'm old enough to remember my grandparents, who are kids of immigrants. And I'm sure that many of the folks listening to this have the same kind of family history.

It's always a bad idea to be de-generalized, but I don't care. I'm an idealist, I think. There isn't any difference between the stories that you hear about immigrants that are today in Chicago that you've heard from our two guests or the stories that my great-grandparents and grandparents lived through. The only thing that's changed is legislative and legal frameworks in the United States.

Same motivations, bringing people. In my case, my ancestors came because they were disenfranchised. They were looking for economic opportunity. It sounds like a similar situation to what I think our guest's families went through the same thing. And what you can't find is folks that are more committed to the American dream than immigrants.



I mean, it sort of boggles my mind to listen to the rhetoric and then think about the reality. The most loyal folks. If you think about the effort. Ere outlined how it's virtually impossible to become a U.S. citizen as an immigrant. And it's an even longer line if you add up all the steps that Ere outlined.

I think these are folks who are highly motivated and come here for a reason. Again, that's the indirect reason, and it's emotional, but to us, it governs a lot of our giving priority. The Immigration Fund is a very effective way. I think we've heard from two organizations, but the fact of the matter is there are dozens, literally dozens of organizations that are providing legal support, representation support, organizing support, advocacy across the city, the region, and the state.

And I can't think of a more effective way to reach those needs because it is such a diverse set of executors out there, than through this kind of pool giving that we've gotten ourselves involved in.

**AS:** Thank you, Bob. There are a lot of lines between what you and Heather shared. And one of the things that's resonating for me is really stepping in when you see a gap.

To that point, I'm curious. To both of you, what do you think is the most misunderstood about the realities of immigration in the U.S.? And how can philanthropy help to shift that narrative? Heather?

**HS:** Fasika and Ere talked a good deal about some of those misperceptions. I'll just add the myth and the rhetoric out there that immigrants are somehow a criminal population that's just flat-out wrong. Immigrants are less likely to commit crime than native-borns, period. That's just a fact.

Also, immigrants are huge contributors to our economy. In Illinois, 68 percent of immigrants are working or seeking work at higher rates than native-borns, which is at 64 percent. One out of every six workers in the state of Illinois is an immigrant, and over 25 percent of the entrepreneurs in the state of Illinois are immigrants. Way over the population percentages.

They're net contributors, hugely helpful to growing our economy. The only reason Chicago is now growing in population is because of net immigration here from outside the country. We benefit tremendously, and I do think we need to... Philanthropy can really help try to amplify facts in lots of different ways. And try to change hearts and understanding on the value that we all benefit from the immigrant population. I think there's just a lot of misinformation out there that has to be combated.

**BQ:** Could I add one more thing to Heather's comment about misunderstanding? We had, I don't know, about 20 or 15 years ago or so, we had a demographer come and talk to our executive group about international trends. Something that is unique about the United States that we forget is every other mature industrialized country on earth has a population decline that they're facing and that directly affects national retirement systems, which in the U.S. we call Social Security.

We would've already failed the Social Security system if it were not for the power of immigrants that we have. We do have a growing workforce in this country because of immigration. All the other industrial countries do not have that advantage and are in big trouble with their long-term retirement systems.

So, independent of the tough issues that Ere spoke about, the disenfranchisement around retirement, Social Security, wouldn't exist, wouldn't be thriving the way it is, or even with the challenges, if it

weren't for our workforce. I think it's important to think about, it's not a zero-sum issue at all. It's very much a value-added to have these new folks join our country.

**AS:** Thank you for that. One of the questions that we asked of Fasika and Ere, I'm curious if you might have a perspective on this as well. What role do you think cities like Chicago can play in setting an example for how communities welcome and support newcomers?

**HS:** Well, I think Ere and Fasika talked well about good policy, and it was a pleasure to be able to vote for some of those items that they talked about while a state legislator. That is key.

But, in this moment of time, I also want to add that we're in a state and a city where we have a state legislature, a governor, a mayor, who very much support our immigrant population. That's not the case every place around the country. That behooves us then to take risks in a way that other places cannot.

And to stand up to the onslaught of some of the federal directives that are coming out and executive orders that are just plain illegal. I think we as a state and a city and as philanthropy should be helping to make sure we are pushing back legally as much as we can on these things that really are providing constitutional challenges right now.

**AS:** Thank you, Heather. Bob, anything to add there?

**BQ:** I would just add that when I spoke about our initial and direct motivation for getting engaged as an individual, as individual givers through our donor advice fund, we often want to make sure our dollars get spent right away for humanitarian needs. The fact is that advocacy is extremely important. Ere spoke about it, and for exactly the reasons that Heather mentioned.

So, I'm really pleased that through the Funder Collaborative, we're able to support education, advocacy, and the legal representation and justice issues through, I might say 48 organizations that we're funding right now. Just give you an idea of the breadth and scope of the effort.

**AS:** Thank you both. Final question for the two of you. What advice would you give to people who are considering supporting immigration work but aren't sure where to start? Whether that's with \$25 or \$25,000?

**HS:** No wrong way, first of all. I'd say if there's an organization you know of, a community-based organization, they're stressed right now. Every single one, they're doing work that needs to be done. So, if you know an organization and think well of it, give if you can.

And then just say, if it's an area where I hadn't felt like I knew much about it, there are lots of different tables where you can one, become personally involved if you want to and learn more about it before you make decisions like the collaborative that Bob's involved in, like the Unity Fund.

There are also places like Forefront that provide those kinds of tables. Learn first if you want, and do it in a pooled way where your dollars can be used really effectively. But truly delve in. The organizations need it now. It's really a critical moment.

**BQ:** At the Funder Collaborative, we have an immediate charge. We normally have what we refer to as our core giving program, and then we also have special initiatives where we make grants out for unique

issues. This year, we have an immediate special initiative underway to raise at least a million and a half dollars, new dollars by June, to support the kind of issues that Ere and Fasika spoke about.

And we're on our way. It's easy to do. Shameless Commerce Division here. I would say go right to [cct.org](http://cct.org). In the keyword field, type in the word immigration, and you'll get right to our page where you can give small dollars or allocate from your Donor Advised Fund. If you're a foundation, we'd love to have you join the party. It's an extremely administratively efficient organization, and we're proud of the work that we do.

**AS:** Thank you both for that. And huge thanks to you both for reminding us that giving isn't just about writing a check, it's about leveraging resources, influence and platforms to create lasting change.

Before we go, I want to leave you with a call to action. If you're considering supporting this cause, start by listening, learning and connecting with organizations on the ground. And if you're already involved, think about how you can inspire others to join you in this work.

Thank you to our incredible guests for sharing their stories and insights. Your commitment to this cause is truly inspiring. Thanks to you all for listening. Let's keep the conversation going.