CASA: *Building Power Locally, Influencing Policy Nationally*

2025

BACKGROUND

Since its founding, CASA has embraced a clear vision: the people who need health care policies the most become the most effective advocates for change. With support from the national Voices for Health Justice project in Maryland, CASA scaled an organizing model that transforms service recipients into policy leaders—securing major policy wins in Maryland while deepening its reach, trust, and long-term impact as both a service provider and movement-builder.

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TURNING ADVOCACY INTO IMPACT

CASA's track record shows what's possible when grassroots organizing is paired with strategic support. The organization has led campaigns that passed police reform, tenant protections, and worker rights legislation. From winning the Maryland Dream Act (2012) to raising the state minimum wage (2019) to ending ICE detention partnerships (2021), CASA's wins are grounded in the lived experiences of its members.

That foundation proved essential in March 2024, when six construction workers—including two longtime CASA members—died in the Key Bridge collapse in Baltimore. CASA immediately mobilized: conducting wellness checks, coordinating family reunification with federal officials, providing interpretation and culturally responsive resources, and launching a national advocacy campaign. Within days of the bridge tragedy, Executive Director Gustavo Torres met with President Biden to press work permits for essential workers via Temporary Protected Status.

CASA's capacity to lead in crisis is rooted in its infrastructure—and enhanced by support from Voices for Health Justice's immigrant health cohort. The cohort provided policy analysis, peer-learning, and narrative tools that strengthened CASA's campaign strategy and storytelling in real time.

CASA's approach exemplifies what Stanford researchers identify as 'functional organizing'— a model where organizations provide essential services that meet members' daily needs while building the foundation for sustained advocacy. In a comprehensive study of large-scale civic organizations, Stanford researchers highlighted CASA as a prime example of how immigrant organizations can achieve significant scale and impact by integrating service delivery with member organizing, creating what they termed 'a virtuous cycle of support, engagement, revenue generation, and impact.'

STRATEGIC LITIGATION AND INTEGRATED SERVICES

What sets CASA's model apart is its integration of services and its ability to go beyond issue campaigns. For instance, a successful constitutional challenge to President Trump's birthright citizenship executive order resulted in a nationwide injunction—demonstrating CASA's legal impact and community-rooted advocacy.

"At CASA, our membership chooses the policy priorities that we work on, and we've seen time and time again, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, ***the dire need for health care access and health care coverage and services in the immigrant community."*** — Ninfa Amador-Hernandez, Maryland Policy Manager, CASA

The Challenge: Exclusion from Care Demands a New Model

While the Affordable Care Act (ACA) expanded coverage to 28 million people, more than 275,000 undocumented Marylanders were left out. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the deadly consequences of that exclusion.

Traditional advocacy often speaks about communities—not with them. CASA builds power within communities, organizing those most directly impacted.

THE CASA APPROACH: A YES/AND STRATEGY

CASA's work balances the "yes/and"
Yes to meeting urgent needs—and yes to building long-term power.

How does CASA turn service recipients into advocates?

It starts with trust. CASA has ten welcome centers, five of them in Maryland. When families come to any of CASA's Welcome Centers, for help with immigration paperwork, housing issues, or job problems, they're also building lasting relationships. Staff take time to explain why these problems exist in the first place.

The process unfolds naturally: when someone accesses legal help, they then learn how their individual challenges connect to bigger policy issues. From connecting the experiences of pregnant women seeking prenatal care with the plight of thousands of immigrant families with the same barriers, or connecting the stories of workers experiencing wage theft with broader labor exploitation struggles, it is clear that once people understand that their struggle is part of a larger pattern, many want to do something about it. CASA provides training and support for people ready to share their stories with policymakers or at community events.

What keeps people engaged beyond getting help with one problem?

CASA's Welcome Centers work like community hubs where people can address multiple needs in one place. Someone might start by getting help with immigration paperwork, then learn about financial planning services, and eventually join a job placement program.

This approach means people don't just solve their present problem and leave. CASA's structuring ensures people receive assistance for their ongoing needs—immigration legal aid, housing support, employment assistance, citizenship services, and financial planning—which naturally deepens their relationship with the community over time.

How does CASA work with other organizations to win bigger victories?

CASA recognized early on that immigrant health advocacy needed broader coalitions. Rather than building temporary partnerships for single campaigns, they created a permanent immigrant health care advocacy table with strategic partners. One coalition highlighting this dynamic is the partnership between CASA and the state's largest health care consumer advocacy organization, Maryland Citizens' Health Initiative Education Fund (MCHIEF). CASA mobilizes immigrant families directly affected by state health policies while MCHIEF provides legislative expertise and policy strategy.

CASA also coordinates with coalitions like Empowerment for Collective Change, which connects Black faith communities across Maryland.

This is what sustainable organizing looks like. Together, they've trained advocates from seven different communities and built relationships that support multiple campaigns over time, not just single issues.

Impact at a Glance

CASA's integrated model delivers more than policy wins in Maryland— **it builds lasting power.**

PHOTO COURTESY OF CASA

What has CASA accomplished through this approach?

The numbers tell a powerful story. Through the Healthy Babies Equity Act, over 10,000 pregnant immigrants gained access to Medicaid coverage, supporting more than 3,100 births. The Health Equity Resource Communities Act, work led predominantly by Maryland Health Care for All Coalition and supported by CASA, secured $59 million over five years for community-led health initiatives. And the Access to Care Act, set for implementation in 2026, will expand coverage regardless of immigration status.

But CASA measures success beyond policy wins. They've connected with 30,000 people across Maryland, with over 3,200 taking concrete advocacy actions which include attending hearings, making phone calls, and joining rallies. Over 1,400 people became ongoing members who stay engaged beyond single campaigns, and they've trained 58 new leaders through structured development programs.

What has CASA accomplished through this approach?

The Healthy Babies Equity Act campaign shows CASA's people-powered model in action. Community members who needed prenatal care were able to become the campaign's most powerful advocates. Women testified while pregnant about the fear of giving birth without insurance. Months later, they returned to the state Capitol with their newborn babies, showing legislators the real-life impacts of the policy they had passed. These weren't professional advocates speaking for communities—these were the people most affected by the policy, speaking for themselves.

> *"Our member engagement is a great model of organizing and services working together."*
>
> — Ninfa Amador-Hernandez, Maryland Policy Manager, CASA

Conclusion: A Roadmap for the Future

Real change happens when those most excluded from systems become architects for new ones. CASA's model demonstrates that by aligning direct services with organizing and advocacy, organizations can both meet immediate needs and build durable power.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Member-Led Priorities build stronger campaigns and **enhance people power accountability**

Service-to Advocacy Pipelines turn need into action

Infrastructure Over One-Offs sustains momentum

Integrated Strategies create whole-community solutions

CASA has supported over 50,000+ individuals in a year through their health and human services—*and they're just getting started.*

Looking Ahead: What's Next

With proven victories under their belt and community-centered infrastructure in place, CASA is positioned to expand their functional organizing model during a critical period for immigrant communities. This infrastructure includes five Welcome Centers operating as community hubs across Maryland, a permanent immigrant health care advocacy table that survived multiple legislative cycles, trained leadership pipelines with new advocates developed through recent campaigns, and sustained coalition partnerships that can mobilize across different communities.

The organization's strategic priorities reflect both defensive and proactive approaches to the challenges ahead.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CASA

Implementation and Defense

CASA's work to implement the Access to Care Act demonstrates how functional organizing translates into sustained accountability. When the Maryland Health Benefit Exchange proposed delaying implementation from January 1, 2026 to January 1, 2028, CASA mobilized swiftly, leading a coalition of more than 100 organizations representing advocacy groups, labor unions, health care providers, faith communities, and Maryland residents to oppose the delay.

Leadership Pipeline Expansion

Building on their successful training of 58 new leaders through Voices for Health Justice, CASA aims to develop 100+ additional leaders from Black and brown communities. This expansion reflects their understanding that sustainable policy change requires deep, ongoing community leadership rather than professional advocacy alone.

National Model Replication

As a multi-state organization, CASA is well positioned to adapt their Maryland lessons to different political environments. The organization's responses to national crises, from the Key Bridge collapse to the birthright citizenship attacks, demonstrate their ability to mobilize rapidly while maintaining local roots.

Comprehensive Health Access

Comprehensive Health Access: CASA's guiding principle continues to be advocating for full health care access regardless of immigration status. CASA's systematic approach, Healthy Babies for pregnant people, Health Equity Resource Communities for systemic change, Access to Care for Marketplace coverage—shows how incremental victories build toward comprehensive reform.

The Voices Legacy

Support from the Voices for Health Justice program helped CASA tangibly build durable movement infrastructure needed to win now and in the near future. The immigrant health care advocacy table, coalition partnerships, and member leadership pipeline created through the support of Voices will serve CASA through a wide range of political cycles and environments.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CASA

As CASA's Executive Director Gustavo Torres noted when meeting with President Biden after the Key Bridge Tragedy:

"The best way to honor lives lost is with real substantive relief."

CASA's model proves that immigrant organizations can deliver substantive relief by building power from the ground up, transforming individual needs into collective action, and creating lasting change through the integration of needed services, organizing, and advocacy.