

Agency for Change Podcast: Mary Choate, Executive Director, CLIA (Center for Legal Immigration Assistance)

Connect with Mary and CLIA at:

- Donate to CLIA for Give to Lincoln Day: givetolincoln.com/nonprofits/center-for-legal-immigration-assistance
- CLIA Website – cliane.org/

Mary Choate: 0:01

If something feels like it's the right thing, do it. If it feels like it's the wrong thing, don't do it.

Announcer: 0:10

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

Lyn Wineman: 0:37

Hey everyone, welcome back to the Agency for Change podcast. This is Lyn Wineman, President and Chief Strategist at KidGlov. So today, starting with a question, what does it take to stand up for people who are navigating one of the most complex and personal journeys of their lives, and that would be immigration. Today's guest knows firsthand. Mary Choate is the Executive Director of the Center for Legal Immigration Assistance, or CLIA, where she and her team provide vital legal services with both compassion and care. From Mary's early days as a staff attorney to now leading the organization, she has become a trusted advocate for Nebraska's immigrant community. Let's dive into her story and to the powerful mission behind CLIA. Mary, welcome to the podcast.

Mary Choate: 1:30

Oh, thank you. I appreciate you guys inviting me.

Lyn Wineman: 1:34

Absolutely. It seems like what we're going to talk about today is very timely information, and I'd love to have you start by telling us more about the Center for Legal Immigration Assistance.

Mary Choate: 1:49

Awesome. So we have been around Lincoln, Nebraska since 2001. And our main mission is to provide comprehensive legal services so immigrants and refugees in Nebraska can thrive. And it's very important to us to provide legal services because there's a lot of misinformation about legal services. There's people doing legal services that should not be doing legal services. So our agency is very important to provide adequate knowledge about immigrants and refugees' legal status and what they can do and et cetera. So it's very important that we and other agencies like us exist.

Lyn Wineman: 2:27

Yeah, Mary, I have to admit I haven't had a lot of experience with the Nebraska legal system, luckily, but I've got to feel like it would be overwhelming for someone who has grown up here in Lincoln, Nebraska. Much less I can't imagine what it would feel like for somebody who is going through immigration. I'm curious if you could tell us what makes the mission and the work that you do so important right here in Nebraska.

Mary Choate: 3:00

Well, Nebraska has a large immigrant population, not only for refugees but other types of immigrants as well, because refugees are immigrants as well. But there's many different ways to come here to the United States. There's many ways to be in the United States, but Nebraska has a large population. Yeah, your neighbors are probably have a immigration story that they could tell so for Nebraska. That's why immigration is so important and just legal services in general are so important, because it helps our neighbors. It helps people who live in Nebraska, who are residents and pay taxes in Nebraska.

Lyn Wineman: 3:41

Yeah, I love that. So, Mary, I'm always curious how people end up in the roles that they are in. What inspired your path from law school to leading CLIA?

Mary Choate: 3:55

Out of law school, I did want to do immigration work. I wanted to do the immigration legal field, and so I was applying for jobs, and then I got a job at this agency. It was my first job as a staff attorney, working with refugees, specifically the community.

Lyn Wineman: 4:14

And that was back in 2017.

Mary Choate: 4:16

And so I really was excited to just work with immigration in general and immigrants, because I've always wanted to work with immigrants and I did my internships in law school with immigration, with immigrants as well, so I'd always just wanted to work with in that field.

Lyn Wineman: 4:33

Yeah, that sounds great and you mentioned the organization started, I think, in 2001, but I know you joined in 2017. How has CLIA evolved since you joined in 2017?

Mary Choate: 4:49

We're a fairly small staff and a very small office back then. Our office has expanded and so has our staff and our programming as well, so it's something I'm quite proud of the agency of evolving so quickly. I mean in eight years we've done a lot and I'm quite proud with how we've just expanded.

Lyn Wineman: 5:10

Yeah, yeah. So we're having this conversation and I'm going to just say this because people might listen to this podcast you know, a week from now, a month from now, two years from now, but we're recording the podcast. It's May of 2025. There's a lot going on. Anything in particular going on right now that's really changed your work, or put an exclamation point on your work.

Mary Choate: 5:41

I mean, this will probably be in the history books, if you're listening in the future, but there's a lot of difficulty right now just because of public or you know how the public perception of immigration is and how the current administration is portraying immigrants and refugees and particular different kinds of refugees. You know on where they're from, you know and being outright very obvious on their hatred towards people of different races and ethnicities specifically the current administration just how they've acted towards immigrants. And then they've also added to the public discord as well by doing propaganda and influencing the media on how they portray immigrants as well. So people have this misnomer on how immigration works and they just they don't have any information because they're relying on the media, who's portraying it very incorrectly, or the government, who's also not portraying it very well.

Lyn Wineman: 6:43

Yeah. So, Mary, I'm just curious is this situation increasing your workload or changing the work for you and your team?

Mary Choate: 6:54

It's both. It's changing and increasing. We have a lot of interest in how people can fix their situation. That sort of thing. Help keep people protected. So we are encountering many different situations like that.

Now we have changed a little bit because we are trying to be more not necessarily lobbying, but we're being advocates in a sense that we're advocating for our clients outside of the agency, so we're trying to do know your rights stuff, that sort of thing, inform our clients about what they can do in a situation if they're confronted by ICE officials, that sort of thing. So we are trying to be more advocates as well in terms of, like, teaching people about the rights.

Lyn Wineman: 7:42

Absolutely. Having done a bit of that work, Mary, it is a pretty big shift. I mean, it's in the same area, but it's a new way of applying your skills and your information. So I'm very much into storytelling. In the field of marketing, we like to talk about storytelling. I'm really curious, Mary can you put this in perspective for us by sharing a powerful moment or story that shows the impact of the work that you do?

Mary Choate: 8:14

Yeah, so when I first joined the agency, I did my first asylum case and that was back in 2017.

And then about two years ago or so, we had the first interview and it took a long time to have the interview for asylum and she had suffered, you know, war crimes in Iraq. She had undergone a lot of trauma and it was quite horrific what she had gone through, and we did the asylum interview and it took a while to get a response. But last year we got a response and she was approved for asylum and that was like a period of seven or six years or so where I worked on that case and I worked with this client and getting that person asylum after such a long time, kind of it, does make my work really meaningful. There's been cases where I've gotten people they're just their green card and they've just sobbed to me. You know that's why I work the work that I do and you know, continue doing this job because of clients like that, I just living day to day and really just wanting something that other people would think would be simple. It really means a lot to them yeah.

Lyn Wineman: 9:35

I think for me, as somebody who's not involved in the type of work that you do, I'm always amazed when I hear how long, how long some of these processes take. How long some of these processes take, I mean six or seven years of your life. That's a really long time. I'm trying to think of what I was doing six or seven years ago and it's hard to even put myself back there. So I think it's great that you can work with clients in this way over that time. So, Mary, what's on the horizon for the center?

Mary Choate: 10:09

We're hoping to add more staff members. We're looking for a potentially either a staff attorney or somebody who can be a DOJ representative we have accredited representative, that's somebody who's not an attorney, who can take immigration cases. And then we are also trying to hire, we haven't posted this yet, but we're also trying to hire a marketing development person to help us with developing. You know, just getting marketing now and also getting donors and connecting with donors.

So we're hoping to expand more in the future as well and hire potentially more people.

Lyn Wineman: 10:48

Mary, I don't know if we have a lot of attorneys that listen to the Agency for Change, but I know we have a lot of marketing people in our audience, so hopefully someone will hear this message and give you a call. And that, I think, leads to my next question. For listeners who'd like to learn more, where can they find information about the Center for Legal Immigration Assistance, more information about what you do, maybe to connect with you to check out this job? I'm assuming you take donations as well.

Mary Choate: 11:21

Yeah, this is a big month for Lincoln until the end of May, because I can actually talk about that year. So Give to Lincoln is a big month for nonprofits in Lincoln. So, even if you don't give to my agency, there's tons of agencies that participate and Give to Lincoln Day. Yeah, it's the entire month of May, not just one day, although the last day is at the end of May, I think it's like the 29th.

Lyn Wineman: 11:49

I think you're right. I think the 29th is the last weekday in May, yeah.

Mary Choate: 11:55

And so that's like the last day that you can give, but you can give all throughout the month and it's happening now, and so that's a way you can help the organization. And then also for like learning more about our agency and also just to donate or to find jobs or find other opportunities or just learn about our organization, you can go to our website that's www.clia.neb.org, and you can learn a lot more about our organization, and you can also follow us on social media as well.

Lyn Wineman: 12:33

We'll make sure to have those links in the show notes on the KidGlov website as well for anybody who wants to go back and reference those. That's fantastic.

Mary Choate: 12:42

And I should add. I should add so basically, if you give for Give to Lincoln Day, your donation is basically more for the organization because there's a certain amount that's matched by Lincoln Community Foundation.

Lyn Wineman: 12:56

That's fantastic, you know, we had a few months ago we had Tracy Edgerton, who is the executive director of the Lincoln Community Foundation, on, and one of the great things that they do for nonprofits that participate in Give to Lincoln Day is they've got a very healthy matching program, which a lot of giving programs do not have. So every dollar you donate is expanded by that matching program, and so it is a great way to give. And so, as you're putting together for those of you in the Lincoln area, as you're putting together your list, we're going to encourage you today to think of CLIA on that list as well, to support the good work that they're doing. So one more question I wanted to ask you, Mary. It feels like it'd be a mistake not to ask you if someone wants to support or better understand immigration work in their community, because we've got people listening from across the country and a few internationally. What can someone do if they want to be more supportive?

Mary Choate: 14:04

So just in general for immigrants. I think having a better understanding of immigration law would be a really good start. Even if you don't want to give to agencies, you can volunteer. You can learn more about immigrants. Maybe volunteer at an advocacy center that caters towards immigrants. Maybe working with immigrants rather than judging them from afar would really help towards perception of that person's perception of immigration. So I think that would be a good place to start. If you're not going to give money which you know we prefer. But if you're not going to give donations or you can't give donations, that's also fine. But just working with immigrants and changing your perception and just working from a different point of view would be very helpful.

Lyn Wineman: 14:57

Mary, that is such a powerful point and something I think people should reflect on. And while people are reflecting on that, I'd like to take a quick moment to tell people about something that I am really proud of and, if you've been listening, you've heard me talk about my book *Untangling Spaghetti A Branding Fable*. This is a story-driven guide for mission-driven leaders who might feel stuck or overwhelmed or unsure of how to talk about their impact. This book, it's filled with practical tools. It's got a 55-page downloadable companion guide that's full of things to help you and share the branding wisdom that we have developed at KidGlov over the years and, of course, served with a side of fun and a side of spaghetti. So *Untangling Spaghetti*, I'm proud to say, is an Amazon bestseller and you can find it at [KidGlov.com slash untangling spaghetti](https://KidGlov.com/untangling-spaghetti) or on Amazon.

Lyn Wineman: 16:11

Okay, Mary, let's get back to talking about CLIA. All right, Mary, I'm going to switch gears here and I'm going to ask you my favorite question and I've asked it of everyone who's been on the podcast. Sometimes people feel like it's being put on the hot seat, but all of our listeners know that I am inspired by motivational quotes. I'm so thankful for the people I get to talk to like yourself, who have so many great things to say. I'd love to ask you for a Mary Choate original quote to inspire our listeners.

Mary Choate: 16:46

Yeah, I know this question yeah, so let me think here. So something related to immigration, or just in general, I would say, because this is something of you know I've been working with immigrants since 2017, and I've always really loved immigration and the concept just comes from helping your neighbor and doing the right thing. I guess my inspirational quote would be like if something feels like it's the right thing, do it. If it feels like it's the wrong thing, don't do it, because your stomach tells you yeah, that tells you, when you're doing the right thing, do that right thing always. It doesn't matter what the media or whoever is telling you something Always do the right thing and that's something that you can live by. And it and just doing the right thing does not mean it's going to hurt you or anything. It just means it's the right thing or you could do a different thing. People think we expect them to do grand things, but but we just want you to do simple things that go towards the right path. Does that make sense?

Lyn Wineman: 18:08

That's absolutely beautiful. I really love that, Mary, and I know when we talked beforehand you were a little hesitant to give us a quote, but that's a beautiful quote and I love it. I think it's good advice related to immigration assistance. I think it's good advice for life in general, so I really do appreciate that.

Mary Choate: 18:31

Really people would just be, you know better about things.

Lyn Wineman: 18:36

People would just be better about things. That's great. I think it's as I think about my kids and even my two new grandkids now. I think it's great advice for them as well. So I think that's fantastic. Mary, I have

really liked this conversation. I feel like I've learned some new things. Once again. This is a world that I am not in, where you do your work right now. As we wrap up our time together today, what is the most important thing you would like people to know about the work that you're doing?

Mary Choate: 19:11

The work that we are doing is kind of chaotic. Immigration changes quite frequently, especially with this administration. You're also working with people sometimes who don't understand things about immigration, or clients who are very confused and panicked. And don't assume you know something about immigration. Maybe ask a professional or don't assume something based on the media, because the media doesn't really go into it very well. I would just ask and do your own research through a legal way, like a lot of times, people don't know, and I got taught this in college but I think people forgot about. Check your sources, check unbiased sources and you know, don't go on Wikipedia or look at the AI on Google. You have to really know this stuff and if you want to have education and knowledge about immigration, do your own research, and I know people are capable. They just do the easiest thing. Don't do the easiest thing. Do the hard thing and learn about something, rather than making assumptions about immigration and immigrants in general.

Lyn Wineman: 20:27

You know what, Mary, I think you just gave us your second quote of the day there. You know, do the hard thing, not the easy thing, and educate yourself. I think that was a great. I think that was a great quote. So, Mary, I have really enjoyed this conversation. I fully believe that the world needs more people like you, more organizations like the Center for Legal Immigration Assistance, and I just really appreciate you taking time out of your very busy schedule to talk with us on the Agency for Change.

Mary Choate: 20:59

Well, thank you, I appreciate it, and thank you for inviting me and thank you for understanding on why it had to take so long. Having a new little one is a little bit hard to handle, but he's worth it.

Lyn Wineman: 21:12

Absolutely, Mary. Congratulations on the new baby and it's great to have you back in the office again. But best of luck to you and your family.

Mary Choate: 21:24

Thank you so much and thank you for inviting me again.

Announcer: 21:28

We hope you enjoyed today's Agency for Change podcast. To hear all our interviews with those who are making a positive change in our communities or to nominate a changemaker you'd love to hear from. Visit kidglov.com at K-I-D-G-L-O-V.com to get in touch, as always. If you like what you've heard today, be sure to rate, review, subscribe and share. Thanks for listening and we'll see you next time.

