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**BASIC PROCEDURAL MANUAL  
FOR ASYLUM REPRESENTATION  
AFFIRMATIVELY  
AND IN REMOVAL PROCEEDINGS**

November 2022

**NATIONAL  
IMMIGRANT  
JUSTICE CENTER**

**A HEARTLAND ALLIANCE PROGRAM**

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**Please Note:** This manual is a brief guide to asylum practice and does not purport to discuss all aspects of immigration practice related to asylum proceedings. Additional sources should be consulted when more complex questions regarding current law and procedure arise. Many of these resources are referenced in this manual.

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National Immigrant Justice Center

# ACRONYMS

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<b>AG</b>	Attorney General
<b>AO</b>	Asylum Officer
<b>BIA</b>	Board of Immigration Appeals
<b>ICE</b>	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
<b>CAT</b>	Convention Against Torture
<b>CIR</b>	Comprehensive Immigration Reform
<b>DACA</b>	Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals
<b>DHS</b>	Department of Homeland Security
<b>EOIR</b>	Executive Office for Immigration Review
<b>FOIA</b>	Freedom of Information Act
<b>ICE</b>	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
<b>IIRIRA</b>	Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act
<b>IJ</b>	Immigration Judge
<b>INA</b>	Immigration and Nationality Act
<b>INS</b>	Immigration and Naturalization Service
<b>LPR</b>	Lawful Permanent Resident
<b>NOID</b>	Notice of Intent to Deny
<b>NTA</b>	Notice to Appear
<b>SSA</b>	Social Security Administration
<b>TA</b>	Trial Attorney
<b>TPS</b>	Temporary Protected Status
<b>TVPRA</b>	Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act
<b>UAC</b>	Unaccompanied Alien Child
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>USC</b>	United States Citizen
<b>USCIS</b>	United States Citizenship & Immigration Services
<b>VAWA</b>	Violence Against Women Act

# INFORMATION ON NIJC'S ASYLUM PRO BONO PROGRAM

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## The National Immigrant Justice Center

The National Immigrant Justice Center is a Chicago-based nongovernmental organization dedicated to ensuring human rights protections and access to justice for all immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers through a unique combination of direct services, policy reform, impact litigation and public education.

NIJC's asylum pro bono project was founded in 1985 and provides legal representation to low-income non-citizens seeking asylum in the United States. The project is now one of the leading asylum representation programs in the country, handling hundreds of affirmative and defensive asylum cases every year before the Chicago Asylum Office, the Chicago Immigration Court, the U.S. Courts of Appeals, and the Supreme Court.

NIJC's asylum pro bono program relies almost entirely on volunteer attorneys, the great majority of whom have no previous experience in immigration or asylum law. NIJC supports its pro bono partners by providing training, materials, support services, and consultations. Largely as a result of the efforts of its pro bono partners, NIJC has helped thousands of asylum seekers from more than 60 nations begin new lives in the United States. NIJC's asylum pro bono project has become a national model for organizations providing immigration legal services in collaboration with pro bono attorneys.

For more information visit [www.immigrantjustice.org](http://www.immigrantjustice.org).

## NIJC's Clients

NIJC's asylum clients are men, women, and children who have fled civil wars, violence, and persecution around the globe. Many have survived state-sponsored torture and other serious harm. Other clients have been subjected to severe human rights abuses by non-state agents such as guerilla groups and private citizens whom the government in the country of origin is unwilling or unable to control. Through NIJC's asylum project, pro bono attorneys have worked side-by-side with asylum seekers to help ensure they do not have to return to countries where they have suffered or fear harm based on characteristics they cannot change or should not have to change, such as their political opinion, race or nationality, religion, family membership, social status, gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

NIJC provides representation to asylum seekers in affirmative and defensive proceedings. Many of NIJC's clients are already in removal proceedings at the immigration court - the last step before the United States government will deport them to their countries of origin. In these adversarial proceedings before an immigration judge, an individual who has an attorney has a significantly better chance of winning asylum than an individual who is *pro se*.

## What Pro Bono Attorneys Can Expect From NIJC

NIJC understands the majority of its pro bono attorneys have limited immigration law experience. NIJC's pro bono partners report that asylum cases are the most interesting, challenging, and rewarding cases of their careers. Attorneys who accept an NIJC case for pro bono representation can expect that NIJC will provide the support and assistance necessary to capably represent NIJC clients.

NIJC provides pro bono attorneys with:

- Basic asylum trainings offered about twice a year. NIJC offers advanced asylum trainings on emerging issues in asylum law from time to time. NIJC may also provide specialized training sessions upon request. NIJC trainings are typically recorded as webinars and archived. They are available through NIJC's web page: <http://immigrantjustice.org/training-webcasts>.
- Information regarding immigration law, practice and procedure; sample applications, motions and pleadings; documentation; and other case resources.
- Consultation with experienced NIJC practitioners regarding case-related questions, theories, and trial strategies. NIJC attorneys remain current on immigration law, policy, and practice, and frequently serve as faculty at local and national immigration law trainings.
- Professional liability insurance. NIJC carries comprehensive professional liability insurance, which specifically covers its pro bono attorneys.
- Involvement in groundbreaking legal issues and opportunities to interact with individuals from different cultural, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds.
- Unique litigation experience, with opportunities to represent clients before a federal agency or a U.S. Court of Appeals.
- Exceptional legal experience that will enhance a pro bono attorney's career development.

## What NIJC Expects From Pro Bono Partners

The lives of NIJC's clients are quite literally at stake in asylum proceedings. For that reason, NIJC treats every case very seriously and asks that its pro bono partners do the same.

NIJC asks that pro bono attorneys and their law firm or corporate employers agree:

- To attend the next available NIJC training, if the attorney has not already attended a training.
- To provide representation on a case for its duration. This means through completion of the adjudication on the merits of the claim, and if necessary, at the appellate level before the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA). When federal court appeals become necessary, NIJC typically asks that the representing firm consider remaining involved.

- To transfer representation of the case to another attorney in the partner firm if the pro bono attorney is compelled to withdraw representation for any reason other than the emergence of a conflict of interest or a termination of representation due to client misconduct. NIJC is unable to absorb pro bono cases in-house, except in very limited circumstances.
- To inform NIJC of any transfer of representation within the firm or of the addition of attorneys to the legal team assigned to the case.
- To keep NIJC informed of the status of the case. NIJC maintains an agreement with every client referred for pro bono representation and remains “of counsel.” Many federal asylee benefits are only available for a very short period of time after the asylum approval, so it is critical that pro bono partners inform NIJC of case adjudications immediately.
- To keep NIJC informed of any communication issues with the client. If the client has been nonresponsive or difficult to work with, please notify NIJC as soon as possible so that NIJC can try to facilitate communication.
- To contact NIJC if the client appears eligible for another immigration benefit. Pro bono attorneys should understand that applying for other immigration benefits may impact the client’s case. Although NIJC provides legal services in nearly all areas of immigration law, NIJC’s initial involvement in a pro bono asylum matter is typically limited to asylum representation. If a client becomes eligible for another immigration benefit, NIJC may execute a supplementary retainer with the client to assist in seeking that benefit.
- To contact NIJC if the client requests assistance regarding other legal matters or has contact with a law enforcement agency. Other legal matters, particularly those involving the criminal justice system, may impact the client’s immigration case. Although NIJC may be unable to provide technical support on non-immigration legal matters, NIJC has relationships with many other legal aid organizations that may be able to assist the client.
- To contact NIJC before speaking with the media or any members of Congress about the case. NIJC is actively involved in immigration policy and advocacy efforts at the state and national levels, and with local and national media. Coordinating with NIJC will ensure that any advocacy efforts achieve the best possible result for the client.

## Obtaining a Case

NIJC posts on its website a list of descriptions of asylum cases in need of representation every month. To obtain a case from this list, prospective pro bono partners should contact Lilianna (Lili) Henkel, NIJC’s Asylum and Pro Bono Project Coordinator, at (312) 660-1307 or [lhenkel@heartlandalliance.org](mailto:lhenkel@heartlandalliance.org). Once a pro bono attorney has accepted an asylum case for representation, NIJC will send a copy of the client’s file and contact information to the attorney.

Because asylum cases are very resource and labor intensive, NIJC typically assigns these cases only to attorneys affiliated with law firms. Solo practitioners wishing to volunteer with NIJC should contact NIJC’s Pro Bono Manager, Ellen Miller, at [emiller@heartlandalliance.org](mailto:emiller@heartlandalliance.org) to learn about other opportunities.



## First Steps

NIJC recommends pro bono attorneys take the following steps upon receipt of a case:

1. **Review the file in full, including the NIJC cover letter.** NIJC attempts to obtain relevant documentation from clients prior to case acceptance and will share these documents when assigning a case to a pro bono attorney. Upon review of the file, pro bono attorneys will likely identify additional documents that would be useful in supporting the asylum claim and should work with the client to obtain these documents. In addition, the NIJC cover letter contains important information regarding initial steps the attorney should take in the case.
2. **Calendar all deadlines.** NIJC's cover letter to the file lists critical deadlines that, if missed, can make the client ineligible for relief or result in a removal order. NIJC recommends calendaring all of these deadlines immediately, as well as any other deadlines the attorney identifies after reviewing the file.
3. **Contact the client.** NIJC advises the client when her case has been assigned to a pro bono attorney. Often, clients have waited months for assignment to an attorney and are eager to hear from their new lawyers. NIJC asks that pro bono attorneys contact the client within two weeks of case acceptance.
4. **Submit a FOIA request to obtain the client's full immigration file and, if applicable, an ORR request to obtain an unaccompanied child client's shelter records.** If the client was referred to the court from the asylum office, was subject to a credible fear determination upon entry to the United States or has previously applied for any immigration benefits or given statements to immigration officials, the pro bono attorney should request a copy of the client's government immigration file through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). The response to a FOIA request may reveal documents in the government file that could be used for impeachment purposes during the client's trial. FOIA requests from clients in removal proceedings receive expedited treatment. For clients not in removal proceedings, a response may take a year or more. Attorneys representing unaccompanied immigrant children should also file an Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) file request to obtain the records from the child's stay in an ORR shelter. See the "Additional Information" section of this manual for FOIA and ORR file request instructions.
5. **Review the Court Practice Manuals.** If the client's case is before the immigration court, the Immigration Court Practice Manual, available [here](#), describes the procedures and requirements for immigration court practice. The Practice Manual is binding on all parties who appear before the immigration court, unless the immigration judge directs otherwise in a particular case. If a client's case is before the Board of Immigration Appeals, review the BIA Practice Manual, also available [online](#).
6. **File an Appearance and Register with EOIR.** If the client's case is before the immigration court, [register](#) with the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) and file an E-28 appearance form with the Court and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Office of the Chief Counsel as soon as possible. Since June 10, 2013, all attorneys practicing before EOIR (which includes the immigration courts and the Board of Immigration Appeals) must register with EOIR. Registration has traditionally included both an online and in-person component. Recently, the court has added an option to complete the second part of the process virtually. More information about the process is [here](#). Attorneys with cases currently pending before the Court who have not yet completed the registration process must do so immediately.

7. **Bookmark NIJC's [Immigration Procedural Updates page](#)** and check it frequently. NIJC encourages pro bono attorneys to remain current on immigration law, policy, and procedure by regularly reviewing this webpage.

# THE BASICS OF ASYLUM LAW

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## Background

Federal law provides that any individuals who have suffered or fear persecution in their home countries on account of a protected ground can apply for asylum in the United States. This right to seek protection is set forth in the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and implemented in the 1967 United Nations Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. The U.S. Congress codified refugee and asylee protection in 1980 through the Refugee Act.

To qualify for asylum, the applicant must be physically present in the United States. Asylum may be granted to an applicant who establishes past persecution or a well-founded fear of future persecution in the country of origin on account of the applicant's race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. The persecution must be inflicted by the government of the country of origin or an entity the government is unwilling or unable to control. Additional factors, such as the ability to relocate within the country of origin or firm resettlement in another country, may make asylum nonviable. Asylum is a discretionary benefit. In exercising discretion, the adjudicator can take into account negative factors, including violations of immigration law or criminal law.

A grant of asylum conveys significant benefits to the recipient. Unless an asylee commits a serious crime or otherwise violates her status, she cannot be removed from the United States unless the government can show that there has been a “fundamental change in circumstances [in the home country] relating to the original claim...” such that she may no longer be in danger upon return. 8 C.F.R. § 208.24<sup>1</sup>. An asylee is authorized to work and may apply to adjust status and obtain lawful permanent residence (LPR) status one year after the grant of asylum. Further, an asylee is able to petition for and provide asylee status to her spouse and any unmarried children who were under the age of 21 at the time the asylum application was received by the government. These family petitions must be filed within two years of the grant of asylum.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), through U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS), adjudicates affirmative requests for asylum. The Department of Justice, through the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), holds jurisdiction over asylum applications pending in removal proceedings, with some limited exceptions.

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<sup>1</sup> The asylum regulations are the same for applications before the asylum office and the immigration court, but are found in separate sections of the CFR. Asylum regulations relating to application before USCIS/the asylum office are found at 8 C.F.R. § 208, while the regulations relating to asylum applications before the immigration court are found at 8 C.F.R. § 1208. For simplicity's sake, this manual will refer to the Department of Homeland Security regulations at 8 C.F.R. § 208.

## AGENCIES INVOLVED IN THE ASYLUM PROCESS

### Department of Homeland Security (DHS)

- United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) – which houses the Asylum Office (AO)
- Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) – which houses the Office of Chief Counsel (OCC)
- Customs and Border Patrol (CBP)

### Department of Justice (DOJ)

- Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR)
- Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA)
- Office of Immigration Litigation (OIL)

## Jurisdiction Over Asylum Applications

Generally, jurisdiction over an asylum application is determined by whether or not the applicant is in removal proceedings.<sup>2</sup> An applicant is in removal proceedings if DHS has issued a Notice to Appear (NTA) charging the applicant with inadmissibility or removability *and* has filed the NTA with the immigration court. 8 C.F.R. § 1003.14(a). An asylum seeker who is not in removal proceedings applies for asylum *affirmatively* with the USCIS asylum office regardless of whether she entered the United States with permission or remains in lawful status. If USCIS declines to approve the asylum application and the applicant is not in some form of lawful immigration status, then USCIS refers the applicant to the immigration court and removal proceedings commence. At this point, jurisdiction over the asylum application shifts to the immigration court.

If an individual is arrested by DHS or otherwise placed in removal proceedings (e.g. upon referral from USCIS), she must apply for asylum *defensively* with the immigration court. There the asylum application serves as a defense against removal and the court has exclusive jurisdiction.

## Legal Test for Asylum/Refugee Protection

The Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) sets forth the legal test for asylum eligibility. If an asylum applicant meets the definition of a refugee, the application may be granted. A refugee is defined as:

*Any person who is outside any country of such person's nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded*

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<sup>2</sup> There are a few exceptions to this rule. The exception pro bono attorneys will encounter most frequently is for unaccompanied immigrant children (UICs). Pursuant to INA § 208(b)(3)(C), the Asylum Office has initial jurisdiction over all asylum applications filed by an individual previously deemed to be an “unaccompanied alien child,” so long as DHS has not rescinded the individual’s unaccompanied status. “Unaccompanied alien child” refers to children who do not have lawful immigration status in the United States, who have not attained 18 years of age, and who do not have a parent or legal guardian in the United States. 6 U.S.C. § 279(g)(2). Per USCIS policy, this jurisdictional provision previously applied to any previously designated UIC (so long as that designation had not been formally rescinded), even if the individual was no longer a child or had been reunited with her parents. A May 31, 2019, USCIS memorandum changed this policy so that the USCIS Asylum Office would only have initial jurisdiction over asylum applications filed by individuals who met the definition of a UIC at the time of filing. However, this memorandum has been enjoined. More information can be found on the USCIS website [here](#).

*fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.*

INA §101(a)(42)(A). Accordingly, individuals may qualify for asylum if they can prove:

1. A well-founded fear
2. Of persecution
3. Perpetrated by the government or an entity the government cannot or will not control
4. On account of
5. One of the five protected grounds<sup>3</sup>

### **Legal Test for Well-Founded Fear**

In order to establish a “well-founded fear” of persecution, an asylum applicant need only show a *reasonable possibility* that she will be persecuted. *INS v. Cardoza-Fonseca*, 480 U.S. 421 (1987). An applicant who establishes past persecution by the government (or an entity the government cannot or will not control) on account of one of the five protected grounds has met that test and established a rebuttable presumption that she has a well-founded fear of future persecution. 8 C.F.R. § 208.13(b)(1).

An applicant can also establish asylum eligibility by demonstrating an independent well-founded fear of future persecution, *i.e.*, a reasonable possibility that she *will be* persecuted by the government (or an entity the government cannot or will not control) on account of one of the five protected grounds. 8 C.F.R. § 208.13(b)(2); *Ayele v. Holder*, 564 F.3d 862, 868 (7th Cir. 2009). The Supreme Court has stated that a well-founded fear of future persecution can be established – *i.e.*, a reasonable possibility of persecution exists – where “an applicant only has a 10% chance of being shot, tortured, or otherwise persecuted.” *Cardoza-Fonseca*, 480 U.S. at 440.

### **Definition of Persecution**

Neither the INA nor accompanying regulations define persecution. Guidance concerning persecution is thus found exclusively in case law. The most useful definition of asylum in Seventh Circuit case law can be found in *Stanojkova v. Holder*, 645 F.3d 943 (7th Cir. 2011) and NIJC recommends that attorneys cite to this decision in their briefs as the primary definition of persecution. Generally, citations to other decisions are unnecessary. In this decision, the Seventh Circuit divided persecution into three types:

1. “The use of *significant* physical force against a person’s body,”
2. “the infliction of comparable physical harm without direct application of force (locking a person in a cell and starving him would be an example),” or
3. “nonphysical harm of equal gravity” such as “refusing to allow a person to practice his religion . . . a common form of persecution even though the only harm it causes is psychological.”

*Stanojkova*, 645 F.3d at 948. In *Stanojkova*, the Court also noted that a credible threat to inflict grave physical harm would also constitute persecution under the second prong. *Id.*

When determining whether an individual suffered past persecution, the adjudicator must consider the cumulative significance of the record as a whole, rather than each event in isolation. *Nzeve v. Holder*,

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<sup>3</sup> NIJC recommends that attorneys structure their legal memoranda or briefs around these five elements.

582 F.3d 678 (7th Cir. 2009). As a result, various types of harm that generally do not amount to persecution in isolation may be considered persecution when taken in the aggregate. Such harms might include: arbitrary interference with a person’s privacy, family, home or correspondence; enforced social or civil inactivity; economic harm; or constant surveillance. Finally, when determining whether harm rises to the level of persecution, the adjudicator must consider the age of the applicant at the time the harm occurred. *Kholyavskiy v. Mukasey*, 540 F.3d 555, 570 (7th Cir. 2008) (The “harm a child fears or has suffered . . . may be relatively less than that of an adult and still qualify for persecution.”) (internal citation omitted).

## **Government Actor**

In order to qualify for asylum, an applicant must establish that the persecution she suffered or fears was or will be perpetrated by either the government or a group the government cannot or will not control. *Balogun v. Ashcroft*, 374 F.3d 492, 499 (7th Cir. 2004). Thus, an applicant can establish asylum eligibility by showing her persecution was inflicted by a group – or even society at large – that the government refuses to control because it condones or tolerates the group’s activities (such as women who perform female genital mutilation, abusive spouses, or paramilitary groups) or by a group that the government cannot control because the group is too powerful (such as gangs or guerilla groups).

In *Matter of A-B-*, 27 I&N Dec. 316 (BIA 2018) (*A-B- I*), it appears that Attorney General Sessions was attempting to raise the standard for showing the government is unable or unwilling to control a non-state actor without actually asserting that he was raising the standard. He did this by referring to the unable/unwilling standard as requiring a showing that the government “condones” the persecution or demonstrated a “complete helplessness” to protect the applicant as if that standard was interchangeable with the unable/unwilling standard. 27 I&N Dec. at 337. In a second decision, *Matter of A-B-*, 28 I&N Dec. 199 (A.G. 2021) (*A-B- II*), the Acting Attorney General explained that the two standards were the same and meant the same thing (seemingly, the higher standard). Several courts rejected the idea that these two phrases can be used interchangeably and in June 2021, Attorney General Garland vacated both *A-B-* decisions in *Matter of A-B-*, 28 I&N Dec. 307 (A.G. 2021) (*A-B- III*). There, he specifically noted that asylum is available to individuals who have suffered or fear persecution that is “inflicted either by a government or by non-governmental actors that the relevant government is unable or unwilling to control.” *A-B- III*, 28 I&N Dec. at 307 (internal citation omitted).

The Seventh Circuit also has a long history of relying on the unable or unwilling to control standard and this is the standard that should be asserted to the Chicago Asylum Office and Immigration Court. *See e.g., Vahora v. Holder*, 707 F.3d 904, 908-09 (7th Cir. 2013) (explaining that asylum is only available if the persecution was inflicted by the government or “by private actors whom the government is unable or unwilling to control” and noting that reporting non-state violence to law enforcement isn’t necessary to meet this requirement if doing so would have been futile); *Cece*, 733 F.662, at 675 (7th Cir. 2013) (“[T]he standard is not just whether the government of Albania was involved in the incident or interested in harming Cece . . . but also whether it was unable or unwilling to take steps to prevent the harm”); *Hor v. Gonzalez* (“*Hor II*”), 421 F.3d 497, 502 (7th Cir. 2005) (explaining that where the government had effectively told the petitioner he would have to protect himself because they could not protect him, the individual would have a “solid claim for asylum”); *see also Tarraf v. Gonzales*, 495 F.3d 525, 527 n.2 (7th Cir. 2007) (explaining that while *Hor I*, could be read broadly to suggest “that when an alien has been targeted by an armed insurgency . . . he can never establish” asylum eligibility, *Hor II* clarified that “persecution by private actors *can* give rise to viable asylum claims” and so *Hor I* “should not be over-read”).

Generally speaking, if an applicant did not seek governmental protection from persecution by a non-state actor, before fleeing the country, it will be more challenging to establish that the government is unable or unwilling to control the persecutor. However, the BIA has found that an applicant established asylum eligibility based on persecution by a non-government entity even where she did not request governmental protection because the evidence demonstrated that if she had requested help, it would have been futile and would have placed her in greater danger. *Matter of S-A-*, 22 I&N Dec. 1328, 1335 (BIA 2000).

## **The Nexus**

An applicant must show a nexus between the persecution and one of the protected grounds of asylum: race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. In addition, the applicant must establish that the protected ground(s) “was or will be *at least one central reason* for persecuting the applicant.” INA § 208(b)(1)(B)(i); *Shaikh v. Holder*, 702 F.3d 897 (7th Cir. 2012).<sup>4</sup> To meet this “one central reason” requirement, applicants should demonstrate a clear nexus between the persecution and the protected ground and should take care to consider and highlight all evidence in the case that demonstrates nexus: the words and actions of the persecutor; the treatment of similarly situated individuals; country condition documentation; and other evidence.

Nexus can be established through either direct or circumstantial evidence. *Martinez-Buendia v. Holder*, 616 F.3d 711, 715 (7th Cir. 2010). For example, “[i]f political opposition is the reason an individual refuses to cooperate with a guerilla group, and that individual is persecuted for his refusal to cooperate, logic dictates that the persecution is on account of the individual’s political opinion.” *Id.* at 718; *see Jabr v. Holder*, 711 F.3d 835 (7th Cir. 2013). For claims involving harm by non-state actors, it’s particularly important to clearly connect the persecution to the protected ground and distinguish it from “personal” reasons. *See e.g., A-B- I*, 27 I&N Dec. at 339, *vacated by A-B- III*, 28 I&N Dec. 307.

It is important to note that the nexus element is distinct from the protected grounds and the two elements require separate analyses. Thus, the question of whether an applicant holds a political opinion or belongs to a particular social group is completely separate from the question of whether the applicant was persecuted on account of her political opinion or membership in a particular social group.

## **The Five Protected Grounds for Asylum**

The first three protected grounds of asylum (race, religion, and nationality) have well-accepted definitions. The latter two protected grounds (membership in a particular social group and political opinion) are more expansive and controversial in application.

### **1. RACE**

The term “race” includes “all kinds of ethnic groups that are referred to as ‘races’ in common usage.” United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees, Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status ¶ 68 (1992) (UNHCR Handbook). For example, ethnic Albanians and Chechens would qualify as “races” under this definition.

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<sup>4</sup> The REAL ID Act (P.L. 109-13) added the “one central reason” burden of proof to asylum claims. Therefore, this burden only applies to asylum applications filed on or after May 11, 2005.

## 2. RELIGION

Persecution on account of religion can include the prohibition of public or private worship, membership in a particular religious community, or religious instruction. UNHCR Handbook ¶ 72. Serious discrimination towards a person because of her membership in a particular religion or religious community may also constitute persecution on account of religion. *Id.*

## 3. NATIONALITY

The term "nationality" includes citizenship or membership in an ethnic or linguistic group and oftentimes overlaps with "race." UNHCR Handbook ¶ 74.

## 4. POLITICAL OPINION

An applicant's *actual* political opinion and the political opinion *imputed* to the applicant both fall within the political opinion protected ground. If the applicant was or will be persecuted on account of an actual or imputed political opinion, the applicant may be eligible for asylum. While asylum applicants who fear harm due to political activities against the government may constitute the stereotypical asylum claim, applicants may also be able to establish asylum eligibility if they suffered or fear harm based on an actual or imputed opinions against non-state actors that operate as quasi-state actors (e.g., gangs or cartels in certain countries) or based on actual or imputed opinions that conflicted with established societal norms.

The refugee definition at INA §101(a)(42)(B) also specifically provides that persecution on account of political opinion includes persons who have been forced to (or fear being forced to) terminate a pregnancy; to undergo involuntary sterilization; or who have been persecuted (or fear persecution) for a failure to undergo these procedures or other resistance to a coercive population control program.

## 5. PARTICULAR SOCIAL GROUP

"Particular social group" is a broad and evolving concept. Generally, it is understood as a group of people who share or are defined by certain immutable characteristics such as age, class background, ethnic background, family ties, gender, and sexual orientation.

The BIA has said that members of a particular social group must share a "*common immutable characteristic.*" *Matter of Acosta*, 19 I&N Dec. 211, 222 (BIA 1985). That characteristic should be something the group cannot or should not be required to change. *Id.* The *Acosta* immutable characteristics test was the accepted definition of "membership in a particular social group" for more than two decades, until the Board added the additional requirements of "social visibility" and "particularity" to the particular social group definition in 2008. *See Matter of S-E-G-*, 24 I&N Dec. 579 (BIA 2008); *Matter of E-A-G-*, 24 I&N Dec. 591 (BIA 2008). The Seventh Circuit then issued several decisions that invalidated the social visibility requirement and broadened the particular social group definition. *See Escobar v. Holder*, 657 F.3d 537 (7th Cir. 2011); *Sarhan v. Holder*, 658 F.3d 649 (7th Cir. 2011); *Ramos v. Holder*, 589 F.3d 426 (7th Cir. 2009); and *Gatimi v. Holder*, 578 F.3d 611 (7th Cir. 2009).

In 2013, the Seventh Circuit issued a critical *en banc* decision regarding the particular social group definition. In *Cece v. Holder*, 733 F.3d 662 (7th Cir. 2013), the Court explained that the immutable characteristic forming the basis of a particular social group can include "a shared past experience or status



[that] has imparted some knowledge or labeling that cannot be undone.” *Id.* at 670. *Cece* also clarified that the breadth of a group is irrelevant to whether the group is viable for asylum purposes, stating, “[i]t would be antithetical to asylum law to deny refuge to a group of persecuted individuals who have valid claims merely because too many have valid claims.” *Id.* at 673-75. Thus, a group “defined by gender plus one or more narrowing characteristics” can constitute a particular social group. *Id.* at 676.

In 2014, the Board issued two precedential decisions clarifying and reaffirming the particularity and social visibility (renamed as “social distinction”) requirements. *Matter of M-E-V-G-*, 26 I&N Dec. 227 (BIA 2014); *Matter of W-G-R-*, 26 I&N Dec. 208 (BIA 2014). According to the Board, the particularity requirement means that a group must be discrete and have definable boundaries; it cannot be made up of broad and diverse members. *M-E-V-G-*, 26 I&N Dec. at 239. To prove social distinction, the group need not be literally visible, but society must recognize the group as such. *Id.* at 240.

For several reasons, including the Seventh Circuit’s repeated assertions that a social group need not be socially visible or narrowly defined, the BIA’s unreasonable interpretation of “membership in a particular social group,” and the fact that the BIA in *M-E-V-G-* and *W-G-R-* did not explicitly assert an intention to overrule prior circuit case law, case law demonstrates that *M-E-V-G-* and *W-G-R-* are not binding in the Seventh Circuit.

It appears the Seventh Circuit and the BIA agree. In numerous precedential decisions issued after *M-E-V-G-* and *W-G-R-*, the Seventh Circuit did not reference the BIA’s social distinction or particularity requirements or even mention the BIA’s two new decisions. Rather, the Seventh Circuit continues to emphasize that additional requirements like narrowness and homogeneity are not part of its particular social group test and that the Seventh Circuit follows a pure, *Acosta*-only interpretation of the particular social group definition. *See e.g., Salgado Gutierrez v. Lynch*, 834 F.3d 800, 805 (7th Cir. 2016) (rejecting breadth and homogeneity as requirements for establishing a particular social group); *Lozano-Zuniga v. Lynch*, 832 F.3d 822, 827 (7th Cir. 2016) (“This circuit defines social group as a group “whose membership is defined by a characteristic that is either immutable or is so fundamental to individual identity or conscience that a person ought not be required to change.”).

In an August 2018 published decision, the Seventh Circuit noted, “[w]hether the Board’s particularity and social distinction requirements are entitled to *Chevron* deference remains an open question in this circuit.” *W.G.A. v. Sessions*, 900 F.3d 957, 964 (7th Cir. 2018). The Court further “decline[d] to make the *Chevron* determination in this case,” *id.*, but noted in a footnote that “W.G.A.’s arguments that the Board’s interpretation is unreasonable have some force.” *Id.* at 964 n.4. Then, in 2019, the Attorney General and BIA issued two decisions explicitly asserting their understanding that social distinction and particularity are not part of the Seventh Circuit’s particular social group test. In *Matter of L-E-A-*, 27 I&N Dec. 581, 590 (A.G. 2019) (*L-E-A- II*), vacated by *Matter of L-E-A-*, 28 I&N Dec. 304 (A.G. 2021) (*L-E-A- III*), the Attorney General noted that “the Seventh Circuit has declined to apply the particularity and social distinction requirements, requiring only that members of a particular social group share a common, immutable characteristic.” The Board made a similar note in *Matter of E-R-A-L-*, 27 I&N Dec. 767, 769 n.3 (BIA 2020).

**Thus, NIJC pro bono attorneys currently presenting particular social group-based asylum claims before the Chicago Asylum Office and Immigration Court should follow Seventh Circuit – not BIA – case law regarding the particular social group definition**, but should be prepared to explain why Seventh Circuit case law, rather than BIA case law, is binding. NIJC’s Particular Social Group Practice Advisory, which provides more information about the current state of particular social group case

law and best practices for presenting particular social group-based asylum claims, is available on NIJC's website [here](#).

Finally, in 2018, the Board issued a decision holding that an asylum seeker must “clearly indicate the exact delineation of any particular social group(s) to which she claims to belong” and determining that the BIA would not consider a new social group for the first time on appeal. *Matter of W-Y-C- & H-O-B-*, 27 I&N Dec. 189, 191 (BIA 2018) (internal citations omitted). Seventh Circuit law may provide more protection to social group claims that evolve on appeal than the BIA does, *see Cece*, 733 F.3d at 670-71, and the Seventh Circuit has asserted that *W-Y-C-* “did not establish a new rule or even clarify an existing one.” *Gonzalez Ruano v. Barr*, 922 F.3d 346, 353 n.1 (7th Cir. 2019). Nevertheless, it is important that attorneys present all potential social groups before the immigration judge (and argue all asylum elements as to each social group), while being careful not to include so many particular social group claims that the weak claims detract from the strong ones.

As the sharp contrast between BIA and Seventh Circuit decisions makes clear, particular social group case law has changed dramatically in recent years and continues to evolve. Because particular social group case law has grown more restrictive, asylum claims based on membership in a particular social group have become increasingly complex. **It is therefore crucial that attorneys representing NIJC clients with particular social group-based asylum claims contact NIJC to strategize the best social groups for their client.**

### *Asylum Claims Involving Gender Violence*

Women often experience human rights abuses that are particular to their gender. These include rape, molestation, domestic violence, female genital mutilation/circumcision, forced marriage, honor killing, sexual harassment and sexual slavery. Of the five protected grounds for asylum, women typically experience these forms of persecution because of their membership in a particular social group related to their gender. Many adjudicators reject gender-based social groups on policy grounds as being too broad or as creating floodgate concerns. Consequently, it can be a challenge for attorneys to convince some adjudicators to recognize these claims.

In *Matter of Acosta*, 19 I&N Dec. 211 (BIA 1985), the seminal case regarding membership in a particular social group, the Board defined the term “particular social group” as a group that shares a characteristic that members cannot change or should not be required to change. In *Acosta*, the Board explicitly listed gender as an example of an immutable characteristic that can form the basis of a particular social group. Therefore, under the *Acosta* test, gender alone should be sufficient to form a cognizable social group. Moreover, as the Seventh Circuit clarified in *Cece*, there is no requirement that a particular social group be narrowly defined. Like the other protected grounds, membership in a particular social group is determined by the shared trait and not limited by number.

The status of gender-based claims at the BIA is more convoluted. Although the BIA now requires more than the *Acosta* test to establish membership in a particular social group, in August 2014, the BIA held in that married women in Guatemala who are unable to leave their relationship can be a viable particular social group. *Matter of A-R-C-G-*, 26 I&N Dec. 388 (BIA 2014). The BIA specifically declined to address the question of whether the broader group of Guatemalan women could also constitute a particular social group. *A-R-C-G-*, 26 I&N Dec. at 395 n.16.

In June 2018, Attorney General Sessions overruled *A-R-C-G-* based on alleged errors the BIA made in the decision. *Matter of A-B- I*, 27 I&N Dec. 316. Significantly, the Attorney General did not state that the *A-R-C-G-* group could never be viable, although that intent was made clear in the extremely negative dicta throughout the decision. Significant litigation followed this decision, including some decisions that indicated gender-only particular

social groups should be viable. *See e.g., De Pena-Paniagua v. Barr*, 957 F.3d 88, 94-98 (1st Cir. 2020) (explaining why a gender-only particular social group should be able to meet the particular social group test). Then, in June 2021, Attorney General Garland vacated *A-B- I* and specifically stated that adjudicators “should follow pre-*A-B- I* precedent, including *Matter of A-R-C-G-*.” *A-B- III*, 28 I&N Dec. at 309. The vacatur of the illogical, poorly written, and mean-spirited decision of *A-B- I* is very good news for asylum seekers with gender-based claims, but challenges remain, particularly with other asylum elements, such as nexus and “unable or unwilling to control.”

Historically, advocates representing women with gender-based claims often created complex and elaborate social groups for their clients in an attempt to avoid the perception that the group is overly broad. NIJC encourages pro bono attorneys to avoid this practice and to instead make particular social group arguments based on *Acosta*, in which the only requirement for a cognizable social group is that the group be based on an immutable characteristic that the group’s members cannot or should not be required to change. NIJC hopes that as more advocates create social groups based on a pure reading of *Acosta*, adjudicators will begin to accept them as viable and move away from the current scheme of overly narrow and often convoluted particular social group construction.

NIJC’s [Particular Social Group Practice Advisory](#) provides practice tips, strategy, and template language for presenting gender-based asylum claims, particularly in the Seventh Circuit. Attorneys are encouraged to peruse this resource and utilize the legal arguments in their own filings.

## **Past Persecution**

If an applicant establishes that she experienced past persecution on account of a protected ground by the government or an entity the government cannot or will not control, she is presumed to possess a well-founded fear of future persecution. 8 C.F.R. § 208.13(b)(1). At that point, the burden shifts to the government to establish by a preponderance of the evidence that conditions in the country of origin have changed such that the applicant no longer has a well-founded fear, or that it would be reasonable for the applicant to move to another part of the country to avoid persecution. 8 C.F.R. § 208.13(b)(1)(i).

If the government succeeds in establishing changed country conditions or the reasonableness and safety of internal relocation, the applicant may still be afforded so-called “humanitarian” *asylum protection* if she can demonstrate (a) compelling reasons for being unwilling or unable to return arising out of the severity of the past persecution or (b) a reasonable possibility of suffering other serious harm. *See* 8 C.F.R. § 208.13(b)(1)(iii); *Kholiyavskiy v. Mukasey*, 540 F.3d 555, 575-76 (7th Cir. 2008); *Matter of L-S-*, 25 I&N Dec. 705 (BIA 2012); *Matter of S-A-K- & H-A-H-*, 24 I&N Dec. 464 (BIA 2008); *Matter of Chen*, 20 I&N Dec. 16. (BIA 1989). The “other serious harm” must rise to the level of persecution, but *it need not be based on one of the five enumerated grounds. Id.; L-S-*, 25 I&N Dec. 705. This form of asylum is only available to asylum applicants who establish past persecution on account of a protected ground by the government or an entity the government cannot or will not control. It is not available for withholding of removal applicants.

## **Internal Relocation**

If an applicant has a presumed well-founded fear of future persecution based on past persecution, the government may overcome the presumption by establishing by a preponderance of the evidence that the applicant could avoid future persecution by relocating to another part of the home country and that such relocation is reasonable. 8 C.F.R. § 208.13(b)(2)(ii). If the applicant has not suffered past persecution, it is the applicant’s burden to demonstrate she could not avoid persecution by relocating and/or that relocating would not be reasonable. 8 C.F.R. § 208.13(b)(3)(i). However, if the feared

persecutor is the government, relocation is presumed unreasonable unless the government can prove otherwise by a preponderance of the evidence. 8 C.F.R. § 208.13(b)(3)(ii).

In determining whether the applicant could relocate, the adjudicator must first examine whether safe relocation is possible, and if so, whether it would be reasonable to expect the applicant to relocate. *Oryakhil v. Mukasey*, 528 F.3d 993, 998 (7th Cir. 2008). The reasonability of internal relocation should be examined in light of ongoing civil strife; government infrastructures; geographical limits; and social or cultural constraints. 8 C.F.R. § 208.13(b)(3).

## **Future Fear Only Claims**

If an applicant has not suffered past persecution or if her future fear of persecution has been rebutted, the applicant must establish an independent well-founded fear of future persecution. In a future-fear only claim, an applicant must demonstrate the same asylum elements as an applicant with a past persecution claim: persecution by the government or an entity the government cannot or will not control on account of a protected ground. However, because the asylum claim is only forward looking, the applicant must also demonstrate both a subjective and objective fear of persecution. *Cardoza-Fonseca*, 480 U.S. 421; *Ayele*, 564 F.3d at 868.

To satisfy the subjective component in a future fear only claim, the applicant must show that she genuinely fears returning to her country of origin. The objective prong of a future fear-only claim can be established one of two ways. First, the applicant can establish that a reasonably possibility – or at least a 10 percent chance - exists that she will be “singled out individually for persecution” by the government or an entity the government cannot or will not control on account of a protected ground. 8 C.F.R. § 208.13(b)(2)(iii); *Ayele*, 564 F.3d at 868. Second, the applicant can establish that “there is a pattern or practice” in her home country “of persecution of a group of persons similarly situated to the applicant on account of” the protected grounds and the applicant establishes her “inclusion in, and identification with, such group of persons such that . . . her fear of persecution upon return is reasonable.” 8 C.F.R. § 208.13(b)(2)(iii); *Ayele*, 564 F.3d at 868.

In most cases, applicants will claim asylum eligibility based on the possibility that they will be singled out for persecution upon return to their home country, rather than making a “pattern or practice” claim. Pattern or practice claims are extremely difficult to win because few situations of persecution rise to the high level of a “systematic, pervasive, or organized effort to kill, imprison or severely injure members of the protected group” necessary to establish a “pattern or practice of persecution.” *Ingmantoro v. Mukasey*, 550 F.3d 646, 651 (7th Cir. 2008). The burden of proof for “pattern or practice” claims is high and extremely difficult to meet “because once the court finds that a group was subject to a pattern or practice of persecution, every member of the group is eligible for asylum.” *Ahmed v. Gonzales*, 467 F.3d 669, 675 (7th Cir. 2006). Attorneys should note that the “pattern or practice” claim is different from a claim that an applicant will be individually targeted based on membership in a particular social group.

As with an asylum claim based on past persecution, an applicant with an independent fear of future persecution is not eligible for asylum if she could avoid persecution by relocating to another part of her country of nationality, “if under all the circumstances it would be reasonable to expect the applicant to do so.” 8 C.F.R. § 208.13(b)(2)(ii). In future-fear only claims, the burden is on the applicant to show that relocation would not be safe or reasonable, but if the persecutor is a government or is “government-sponsored,” it is presumed internal relocation would not be reasonable. 8 C.F.R. § 208.13(b)(3)(i)-(ii).

# ALTERNATIVES TO ASYLUM

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## Withholding of Removal

Another protection available to individuals fleeing persecution is withholding of removal. INA §241(b)(3). Withholding of removal is a non-discretionary form of relief from removal that is available to applicants who establish it is more likely that not they will face persecution in their country of removal by the government or an entity the government cannot or will not control on account of one of the protected grounds (i.e. race, religion, nationality, political opinion, membership in a particular social group). Withholding may be an appropriate alternative to asylum if an applicant: 1) is ineligible for asylum based on one of the bars to asylum, including the one-year filing deadline; 2) has a reinstated removal order; or 3) there are negative factors in the applicant's past, such as a criminal history that are not felonious but which make a discretionary grant of asylum questionable.

The application for withholding of removal is the same as the application for asylum (Form I-589).<sup>5</sup> One automatically applies for both forms of relief concurrently when submitting the asylum application. Because withholding of removal means that an individual's removal has been withheld, withholding can only be granted *after* an immigration judge orders an individual removed. In a withholding case, the immigration judge will typically issue a decision ordering the applicant removed and then state that the court is ordering that removal be withheld.

The benefits attendant to a grant of withholding of removal are limited. An individual who is granted withholding of removal cannot be removed from the United States to the country from which she was fleeing persecution, but can be removed to a safe third country if one is available. The individual can obtain work authorization – which is renewable annually. However, she may not petition to extend status to a spouse or children and any spouse or children in the United States with her may not be included as derivative beneficiaries on her application. Also, the individual is not permitted to adjust status to legal permanent residency, apply for citizenship, or travel outside the United States.

### Legal Standard for Withholding of Removal

In order to satisfy the test for withholding of removal, an individual must show a clear probability of persecution – that persecution is more likely than not – by the government or a group the government cannot or will not control on account of one of the protected grounds. *INS v. Stevic*, 467 U.S. 407 (1984). This is a more difficult burden to meet than for asylum. As in asylum law, however, if an individual can show she suffered persecution in the past, she benefits from a rebuttable presumption of future persecution. Withholding of removal is mandatory if the individual meets the above clear probability test and establishes that she is not barred from relief.

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<sup>5</sup> Although an individual can technically request withholding of removal and Convention Against Torture (CAT) relief before the asylum office, the asylum office cannot grant those forms of relief. In order for withholding of removal or CAT relief to be granted, an immigration judge must first order the individual removed. *Matter of I-S- & C-S-*, 24 I&N Dec. 432 (BIA 2008).

## Convention Against Torture

The United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (“CAT”)<sup>6</sup> prohibits the return of a person to a country where substantial grounds exist for believing that she would be subjected to torture. *Matter of Y-L-A-G-, R-S-R-*, 23 I&N Dec. 270 (A.G. 2002); *see also Matter of S-V-*, 22 I&N Dec. 1306 (BIA 2000). A CAT claim may be raised even after a final order of removal/deportation has been issued. Additionally, unlike asylum and withholding of removal, an applicant for CAT relief is not required to establish her fear of torture is on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a social group.

Regulations create two separate types of protection under CAT. *See* 8 C.F.R. §§ 208.16, 208.17. **Attorneys requesting CAT relief should be sure to request both types of CAT protection.** The first type of protection is withholding of removal under CAT. Withholding under CAT prohibits the return of an individual to her home country. It can only be terminated if the individual’s case is reopened and DHS establishes the individual is no longer likely to be tortured in her home country. The same bars to withholding of removal exist for withholding of removal under CAT.

The second type of protection is called deferral of removal under CAT. There are no bars to deferral of removal under CAT. As a result, individuals will typically only receive deferral under CAT if they would more likely than not be subject to torture, but are ineligible for asylum or withholding of removal due to the persecutor bar, the terrorism bar, or crime-based bars. Deferral of removal under CAT may be terminated more quickly and easily than withholding of removal. DHS may continue to detain an individual granted deferral of removal under CAT.

Like withholding of removal, CAT relief can only be granted after an immigration judge has ordered an individual removed. Also like withholding, the benefits of CAT are limited. An individual granted CAT relief cannot be removed from the United States to the country where she fears torture, but can be removed to a third country if one is available. The individual may not adjust her status to legal permanent residency or extend her status to family members. CAT holders can generally obtain work authorization.

### Definition of Torture

Torture is defined as any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind . . . when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in official capacity. CAT, Art. 1., 8 C.F.R. § 208.18. The BIA has found that torture “is an extreme form of cruel and inhuman punishment and does not extend to lesser forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.” *Matter of J-E-*, 23 I&N Dec. 291 (BIA 2002). The BIA has also found that indefinite detention, without further proof of torture, does not constitute torture under this definition. *Id.*

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, opened for signature February 4, 1985, G.A. Res. 39/46, U.N. GAOR Supp. No. 51, at 197, U.N. Doc. A/RES/39/708(1984), reprinted in 23 I.L.M.1027 (1984), modified in 24 I.L.M. 535 (1985).

The torture feared must be carried out by the government or someone acting with the acquiescence of the government. 8 C.F.R. § 208.18 (“inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in official capacity”). The Attorney General has held that “acting in an official capacity” means public officials, acting under color of law, by “exercis[ing] power ‘possessed by virtue of . . . law and made possible only because [he] is clothed with the authority of law.’” *Matter of O-F-A-L-*, 28 I&N Dec. 35, 40 (A.G. 2020). Under this definition, a corrupt public official may be acting in an official capacity even if his actions are self-serving. *Id.* at 40-41; *Rodriguez-Molinero v. Lynch*, 808 F.3d 1134, 1139 (7th Cir. 2015) (“It is irrelevant whether the police were rogue (in the sense of not serving the interests of the [country of removal] government) or not.”). Moreover, the individual “need not show that multiple government officials are complicit in order to be entitled to relief” and also does “not have to show that the entire . . . government is complicit in the misconduct of individual police officers.” *Rodriguez-Molinero*, 808 F.3d at 1138-39.

Acquiescence, which is a different question, has been narrowly defined and must include awareness of the torture and failure to intervene thereby breaching a legal responsibility. *Matter of S-V-*, 22 I&N Dec. 1306 (BIA 2000). Significantly, governmental efforts to prevent violence do not mean that the government would not participate in or acquiesce to torture: “it is success rather than effort that bears on the likelihood of . . . being killed or tortured if removed.” *Rodriguez-Molinero*, 808 F.3d at 1140.

### **CAT Standard of Proof**

The standard of proof under CAT is higher than the standard for asylum. The applicant must prove that it is “more likely than not” she would be tortured if forced to return. *Matter of G-A-*, 23 I&N Dec. 366 (BIA 2002). The Attorney General has held that when establishing a fear of future torture, the applicant must show that each step in the chain of events is more likely than not to happen. *Matter of J-F-F-*, 23 I&N Dec. 912 (A.G. 2006). What this standard means in practice in the Seventh Circuit is not completely clear, as the Seventh Circuit explained in *Rodriguez-Molinero*:

The [more likely than not] phrase . . . cannot be and is not taken literally. . . . It would contradict the Convention. . . . It would dictate that while an alien who had a 50.1 percent probability of being tortured . . . would be granted deferral of removal, an otherwise identical alien who had “only” a 49.9 percent probability of being tortured would be removed – an absurd distinction. And it is not enforceable. The data and statistical methodology that would enable a percentage to be attached to a risk of torture simply do not exist. All that can be said responsibly on the basis of actually obtainable information is that there is, or is not, a substantial risk that a given alien will be tortured if removed from the United States.

808 F.3d at 1135-36.

The evidentiary proof required for CAT is very similar to the proof for asylum or withholding claims. All relevant considerations are to be taken into account, including, where applicable, the existence in the State concerned of a “consistent pattern of gross, flagrant or mass violations of human rights.” *S-V-*, 22 I&N Dec. at 1313.

## **Procedure for Raising CAT Claims**

Individuals seeking relief under CAT must bring their claims before an immigration judge. The attorney requests relief under withholding of removal and CAT by checking the “CAT” box in the upper right-hand corner of the first page of the I-589 and by selecting CAT in response to the question regarding protected grounds. When applying for CAT relief, the attorney should be sure to provide evidence demonstrating that the client meets the definition of torture under 8 C.F.R. § 208.18. The attorney should also be sure to brief thoroughly CAT elements in her brief because the elements are significantly different from the asylum elements.

**In nearly every case, NIJC strongly recommends that an attorney request CAT relief.** If a client has already filed for asylum, but did not request CAT relief, the pro bono attorney should amend and supplement the application. Since CAT relief is not as beneficial as asylum, NIJC recommends that CAT be sought in the alternative, while concurrently seeking asylum. Pro bono attorneys with concerns about requesting CAT relief for their NIJC client should contact NIJC.

## **Voluntary Departure**

Voluntary departure permits a removable individual to depart from the United States at her own expense within a designated amount of time in order to avoid a final order of removal. INA § 240B. Voluntary departure is not available in all cases. INA § 240B(c). Generally, NIJC does not recommend that individuals who maintain a fear of persecution or torture seek voluntary departure.

Voluntary departure may be appropriate in certain instances and may be preferable to a removal order. If an individual is issued a removal order she may be barred from reentering the United States for up to ten years and may be subject to civil and criminal penalties if she reenters without proper authorization. In addition, an individual with a removal order is barred for ten years from applying for cancellation of removal, adjustment of status, and other immigration benefits. If the individual receives voluntarily departure and departs within the time ordered by the court, she will not be barred from legally reentering in the future and does not face the bars to relief that an individual with a removal order would face. However, if an individual receives a grant of voluntary departure and subsequently fails to timely depart, the legal repercussions are worse than those attendant to a removal order. INA §240B(d). If individual receives voluntary departure and subsequently moves to reopen her removal proceedings, the grant of voluntary departure is automatically revoked. 8 C.F.R. § 1240.26(e)(1).

An individual may apply for voluntary departure either prior to the master calendar hearing or at the conclusion of a merits proceeding.

## **Master Calendar Hearing**

If the application for voluntary departure is prior to, or at the master calendar hearing, the individual must show that she:

1. Waives or withdraws all other requests for relief;
2. Concedes removability;
3. Waives appeal of all issues;
4. Has not been convicted of an aggravated felony and is not a security risk;
5. Shows clear and convincing evidence that she intends and has the financial ability to depart; and



6. Presents to DHS a valid passport or other travel document sufficient to assure lawful entry into the country of return, unless such document is already in the possession of the DHS or is not needed in order to return to the country in question.

If the individual is able to meet these requirements, then the immigration judge may grant a voluntary departure period of up to 120 days at the time of the Master Calendar hearing. *See* INA § 240B(a), 8 C.F.R. § 1240.26. The judge may not grant voluntary departure beyond 30 days after the Master Calendar at which the case is initially scheduled, except pursuant to a stipulation from the DHS. 8 C.F.R. § 1240.26(b)(E)(ii).

### **Conclusion of the Merits Hearing**

An individual may also apply for voluntary departure after the conclusion of proceedings, if the individual meets the following requirements:

1. Shows physical presence for one year prior to the date the Notice to Appear is issued;
2. Shows good moral character for five years prior to the application;
3. Has not been convicted of an aggravated felony and is not a security risk;
4. Shows clear and convincing evidence that she intends and has the financial ability to depart;
5. Pays the bond required by the judge; and
6. Presents to the DHS a valid passport or other travel document sufficient to assure lawful entry into the country of return, unless such document is already in the possession of the DHS or is not needed in order to return.

8 C.F.R. § 1240.26(c). If the individual establishes these requirements, the immigration judge may grant voluntary departure for a period of up to 60 days. *See* INA § 240B(b); 8 C.F.R. §1240.26(e).

# BARS TO ELIGIBILITY FOR ASYLUM, WITHHOLDING AND CAT

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<b><i>Pro bono</i> attorneys who identify any of these conditions in their cases should contact NIJC.</b>	Bars Asylum?	Bars Withholding/ Withholding under CAT?	Bars Deferral under CAT?
One-Year Filing Deadline Bar: See explanatory section below. INA §208(a)(2)(B); 8 C.F.R. §§ 208.4, 208.34.	Yes	No	No
Persecutor Bar: Individuals who have persecuted another on account of one of the protected grounds. INA § 208(b)(2)(A)(i).	Yes	Yes	No
Terrorism Bar: See the explanatory section below. INA § 208(b)(2)(A)(v).	Yes	Yes	No
Particularly Serious Crime (PSC) Bar: Individuals convicted of a “particularly serious crime.” For asylum purposes, any aggravated felony (as defined under immigration law, <i>see</i> INA § 101(a)(43)) constitutes a PSC. For withholding/withholding under CAT purposes, an aggravated felony constitutes a PSC if the aggregate term of imprisonment sentenced was at least five years. Immigration judges also have the authority to define non-aggravated felony crimes as PSCs. INA §§ 208(b)(2)(A)(ii), 208(b)(2)(B), 241(b)(3)(B)(ii).	Yes	Yes	No
Serious Non-Political Crime Outside the United States Bar INA § 208(b)(2)(A)(iii).	Yes	Yes	No
Danger to the Security of the United States Bar INA § 208(b)(2)(A)(iv).	Yes	Yes	No
Firm Resettlement Bar: Individuals who are <i>firmly resettled</i> within the meaning of 8 C.F.R. §208.15. INA §208(b)(2)(A)(vi); <i>Matter of D-X- &amp; Y-Z-</i> , 25 I&N Dec. 664 (BIA 2012); <i>Matter of A-G-G-</i> , 25 I&N Dec. 486 (BIA 2011).	Yes	No	No
Previous Asylum Denial Bar: Individuals who <i>previously filed for asylum</i> and were denied. INA § 208(a)(2)(C)	Yes	No	No
Safe Third Country Bar: Individuals who <i>may be removed pursuant to a bilateral or multilateral agreement to a safe third country</i> , unless the Attorney General finds it in the national interest to grant asylum. INA §208(a)(2)(A). At present, the United States only has a safe third country agreement with Canada.	Yes	No	No

## The One-Year Filing Deadline

All applicants must file their asylum applications within one year of their entry into the United States.<sup>7</sup> Applicants must prove by clear and convincing evidence that they have filed their asylum application within one year of their arrival in the United States or demonstrate to the satisfaction of the Asylum Officer or immigration judge that they qualify for an exception to the deadline. *See* 8 C.F.R. § 208.4(2)(A). Regulations provide that the one-year deadline assessment should be made on a case-by-case basis by the immigration judge or the Asylum Officer. *See* 8 C.F.R. § 208.4(a)(2) and (a)(5); *Matter of T-M-H- & S-W-C-*, 25 I&N Dec. 193 (BIA 2010). The one-year deadline is extremely harsh, but there are some exceptions, as follows:

- a. If there are “changed circumstances” or circumstances materially affecting the applicant’s eligibility for asylum, for example:
  - a. changes in the applicant’s country; or
  - b. changes in the applicant’s circumstances, e.g., changes in U.S. law or conversion to another religion.

The burden is on the applicant to prove the changed circumstances. The applicant must file the application within a reasonable time after the applicant becomes aware of the change in circumstances.

2. If there are “extraordinary circumstances” that the applicant had no control over that kept the applicant from filing for asylum within a year of entry into the United States. A non-exhaustive list of examples is provided in the regulations and includes mental or physical illness; ineffective assistance of counsel; having some other lawful status; and a timely filed application that was returned for a procedural error and refiled soon after.

The burden is on the applicant to prove extraordinary circumstances. The circumstances must be directly related to the applicant’s failure to file the application within one year. *See* 8 C.F.R. §208.4(a)(4). The applicant must also file the application within a “reasonable” time (generally interpreted to mean less than six months) after the applicant becomes aware of the change in circumstances.

### Calculating the One-Year Deadline

For affirmative applications filed directly with USCIS, the Asylum Office will consider the date USCIS received the application as the filing date for purposes of determining whether the application was filed within one year. However, if the applicant can show by clear and convincing evidence that she mailed the application within one year, the mailing date shall be considered the filing date. *See* 8 C.F.R. § 208.4(a)(2)(ii).

For defensive applications filed with the immigration court, the day the application is received by the court at the court window, by mail, or in open proceedings will be considered the filing date.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For asylum applicants who entered the United States prior to April 1, 1997, the deadline for applying was April 1, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Prior to September 2016, an asylum application for an individual in removal proceedings would not be considered filed until it was received in open court. In September 2016, the Executive Office for Immigration Review issued a memorandum announcing that it would henceforth accept asylum applications filed by mail and at the immigration

To timely file an asylum application, USCIS or the immigration court must receive the application the day before the date of entry, in the following year. For example, an applicant who enters on February 1, 2016 must make sure the application is received by January 31, 2017. Applications received on February 1, 2017 will not be considered timely.

**Practice Tip:**

If a client does not have proof of her date of entry, her *pro bono* attorney should file the I-589 within one year of a date before she entered the United States for which she does have proof. E.g., if the client has proof of a date she was in Mexico before she entered the United States; file the I-589 within one year of that date.

## The Terrorism Bars

Since 2001, Congress has enacted several pieces of legislation that purport to keep terrorists from gaining immigration status in the United States but in practice, result in the denial of protection to many victims of terrorist activity. The USA PATRIOT Act of 2001 (Pub. L. No. 107-56, 115 Stat. 272) and the REAL ID Act of 2005 (Pub. L. No. 109-13, 119 Stat. 231) amended the INA to expand the definitions of classes of people subject to terrorism related inadmissibility grounds. *See* INA §212(a)(3)(B).

### Terrorist Organizations and Activity Defined

A collection of people may be considered a terrorist organization if they are a “group of two or more individuals, whether organized or not, which engages in, or has a subgroup which engages in” terrorist activities. INA §212(a)(3)(B)(vi)(III). Terrorist activity includes any “threat, attempt, or conspiracy” to use “any...explosive, firearm, or other weapon or dangerous device (other than for mere personal or monetary gain), with intent to endanger...the safety of one or more individuals or to cause substantial damage to property.” INA §212(a)(3)(B)(iii)(V). To be terrorist activity, the act must be “unlawful under the laws of the place where it is committed (or which, if it had been committed in the United States, would be unlawful under the laws of the United States or any State).” INA §212(a)(3)(B)(iii).

The definition of “engage” in terrorist activity was also expanded to include material support to a terrorist organization (under the new, broad terrorist organization definition). As a result, people who support groups considered to be terrorist organizations are barred from asylum, withholding of removal,

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court window. The memorandum can be found here:

[https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/pages/attachments/2016/09/14/oppm\\_16-01.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/pages/attachments/2016/09/14/oppm_16-01.pdf)

and withholding under CAT. Thus far, the Board has not recognized any defenses to this bar, although there are various exemptions that can be sought for individuals found subject to the bar. Duress, infancy, self-defense and mental incapacity do not excuse material support. Being held hostage in one's home while members of a guerilla group lodge for the night could even trigger the bar. Paying a ransom to avoid the assassination of a family member could trigger the bar. The statutory language, as one BIA Board member observed, is "breathtaking in its scope." *S-K* at 948. (Osuna, J., concurring).

Under this framework, pro-democracy groups who struggle against dictatorships may be considered terrorist groups because the actions they take against the regime oppressing them are against the law in the place where the actions they take. Government attorneys have conceded that under this definition, U.S. Marines operating in Iraq before the fall of Saddam Hussein would have qualified as a terrorist organization. *Matter of S-K*, 23 I&N Dec. 935 (BIA 2006), Oral Argument Transcript at 25.

### **Exemptions**

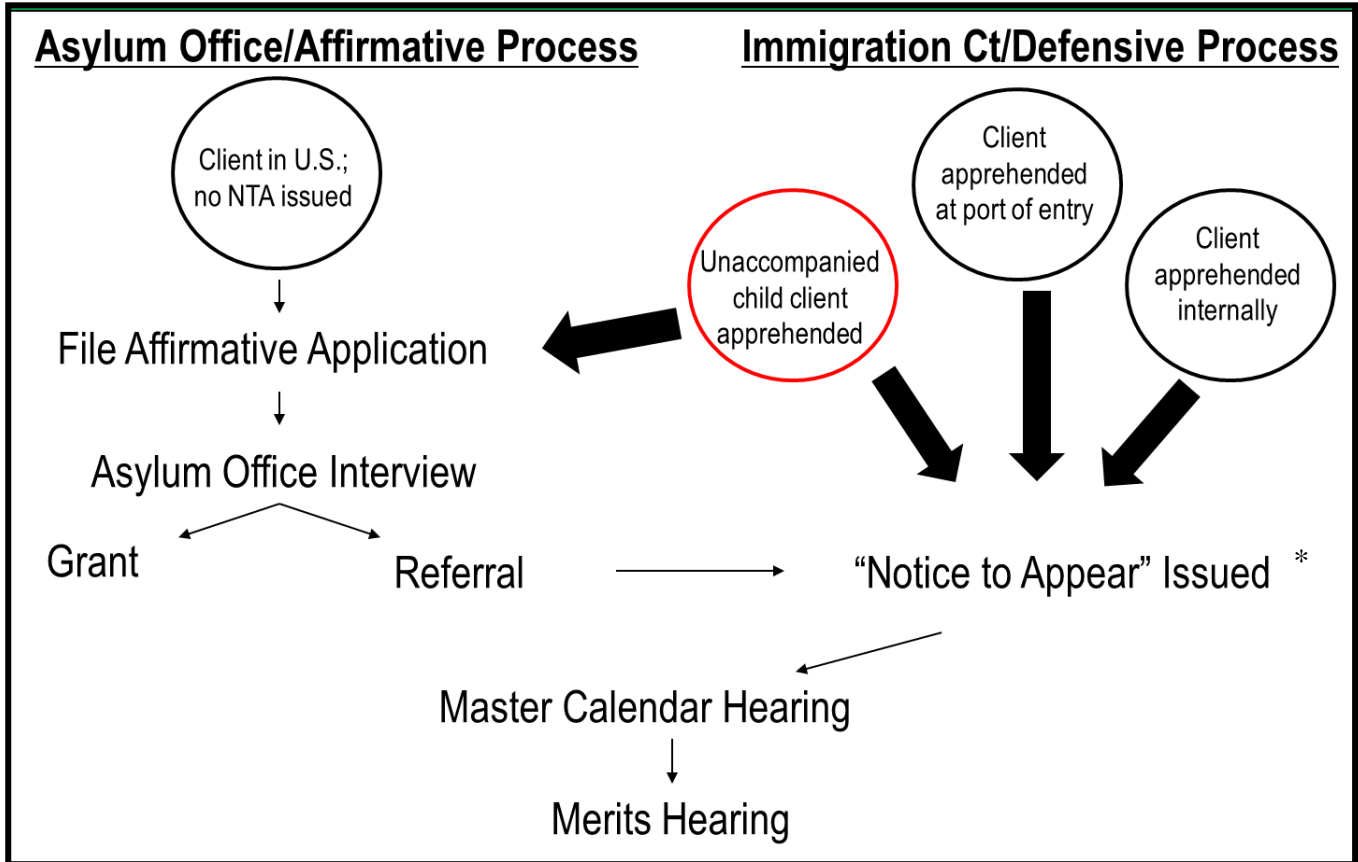
Although it is possible to obtain an exemption from the Department of Homeland Security for some activity under the terrorism related inadmissibility grounds, these exemptions are difficult to obtain and are granted at the unreviewable discretion of the DHS. A list of the exemptions currently available can be found at <https://www.uscis.gov/laws/terrorism-related-inadmissability-grounds/terrorism-related-inadmissability-grounds-exemptions>.

### **How These Issues Arise**

Attorneys representing asylum seekers must keep these expanded definitions of terrorist activity in mind. Facts that might initially be viewed as bolstering applicants' claims for asylum and demonstrating persecution can now make them ineligible for asylum. Pro bono attorneys working with clients who presents facts that might trigger terrorism bars should contact NIJC.

# FLOW CHART: STEPS IN THE ASYLUM PROCESS

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*\*Note: An individual is not in removal proceedings until DHS has filed the Notice to Appear (NTA) with the immigration court, initiating proceedings. Many asylum seekers are issued an NTA upon apprehension at the border, but DHS does not file the NTA with the court until months or years later. Unless and until the NTA is filed with the court, the individual is still considered an affirmative applicant and must file her asylum application with USCIS.*

# THE ASYLUM PROCESS

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There are two ways to apply for asylum: affirmatively and defensively.<sup>9</sup> A person who is physically present in the United States can affirmatively request asylum in the United States by filing an application with USCIS. An individual who has been served with a Notice to Appear (NTA) and has had that NTA filed with the immigration court, placing her in removal proceedings, may file an asylum request defensively before the immigration court. Asylum applications filed in removal proceedings are called “defensive” applications because the application is a defense to removal. Even if the applicant first applied for asylum with USCIS, the application becomes defensive once the asylum applicant is in removal proceedings.

## Documentary Requirements

A complete application for asylum, filed affirmatively or defensively, includes the following:

### Asylum Office (affirmative)

(file with the Nebraska Service Center)

- TVPRA cover sheet<sup>10</sup> and ORR release form (for unaccompanied children’s cases only)
- Appearance form: G-28
- Skeletal application for asylum (I-589) and 1 passport photo
- 1 copy, plus an additional copy for each derivative
- No filing fee!

### **Then one week before the interview, file: (with the Chicago Asylum Office)**

- Legal memo
- A detailed client affidavit/declaration with a translator’s certificate if necessary
- Annotated Index
- Supporting Documentation, including
  - Identity Documents, Expert Affidavits (possibly), and Other Corroboration
- Evidence of claimed relationship for all included family members

### Immigration Court (defensive)

- Appearance form: E-28
- Skeletal application for Asylum (I-589)
- 1 copy of the I-589 for each derivative, 1 copy for your records, 1 copy served on DHS
- No filing fee!

### **Then prior to merits hearing, file:**

- Brief
- A detailed client affidavit/declaration with a translator’s certificate if necessary
- Annotated Index
- Supporting Documentation, including
  - Identity Documents, Expert Affidavits (possibly), and Other Corroboration
- Evidence of claimed relationship for all included family members.
- Certificate of service on DHS

#### **Practice Tip:**

Whether a client has an affirmative or defensive case, the attorney should have her sign the USCIS appearance form (G-28) as soon as representation begins. That way, if the client is detained or the pro bono attorney needs to urgently contact USCIS about the case, the attorney will be able to do so immediately.

<sup>9</sup> As previously noted, pursuant to the TVPRA and current USCIS policy, the Asylum Office has initial jurisdiction over the asylum applications filed by individuals who meet the definition of an unaccompanied child.

<sup>10</sup> Available on NIJC’s website [here](#).

## **Preparing the Asylum Case**

Asylum interviews and hearings are generally quite simple and straightforward compared to civil trials. The typical NIJC asylum interview lasts two to four hours and involves the asylum officer questioning the client regarding her claim. A typical asylum hearing consists of the testimony of the client, additional testimony from other fact and expert witnesses, and brief opening and closing statements, all of which must usually be completed in three to four hours. Despite the fact that the interviews and hearings are generally straightforward, asylum hearings do, in fact, require a great deal of preparation, particularly with the testimony of the client and other witnesses. Moreover, asylum law has grown increasingly complex in recent years and in most cases, attorneys should expect it to be necessary to conduct significant legal research to support their arguments regarding their client's asylum eligibility.

NIJC strongly recommends that pro bono attorneys begin case preparation by reading background material on the recent history of their client's country. Attorneys will save a lot of time and minimize the chances of confusion or error by having a basic understanding of the situation on the ground in the client's country.

### **Step One: Interviewing the Client**

Many pro bono attorneys underestimate how much time with the client is necessary to adequately prepare the client's affidavit and testimony. Interviewing the client, in the process of preparing the I-589 and affidavit, and in preparation for hearing testimony, is the most difficult and critical part of handling an asylum case.

In interviewing asylum clients, pro bono attorneys may encounter challenges they are not accustomed to in other sorts of cases. For example, clients in asylum cases rarely speak English and will usually need a skilled interpreter (to be provided by the pro bono attorney), which will make client meetings take longer and require careful management to ensure the client and attorney directly communicate. In addition, many clients may initially be reluctant to share the details necessary to establish a viable asylum claim due to the personal nature of the information or they may not understand why it is necessary to share such information in the first place. Others may find it difficult to fully explain the reasons for their flight to the United States due to deeply engrained social, gender, or religious norms. Some clients have had little to no education, may be illiterate, or may have no experience with the operations of a judicial system. Finally, many clients are coping with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or mental illnesses related to their past trauma.

Pro bono attorneys should also be aware that they will need to use a different style of interviewing when interviewing clients in asylum cases. Lawyers in this country often have a style of interviewing that can seem threatening to NIJC clients. An intense, rapid-fire approach, bearing down hard on minor inconsistencies, may be very frightening to clients seeking asylum. As a result, a gentler and affirming approach is generally required.

Most pro bono attorneys will find that communication with their asylum clients is very different from communication with their business clients. Asylum clients often do not have regular access to the internet and/or may not have an email address. Many clients prefer to text rather than to speak over the phone and may not be used to leaving voice mail messages. Unless a client indicates that she prefers substantive communication to occur via email, NIJC strongly encourages pro bono attorneys not to conduct substantive communication regarding the client's case over email. This is because it will be



difficult to judge a client's comprehension of the matter being discussed over email and a client may not feel comfortable expressing her lack of comprehension.

## **1. ESTABLISHING TRUST WITH THE CLIENT**

Establishing trust with the client is essential in asylum cases. The majority of NIJC clients come from countries whose legal systems are corrupt and inept at best. As a result, they are generally unfamiliar with and/or suspicious of the legal proceedings that they find themselves in. This suspicion makes it difficult for asylum seekers to trust their attorneys, let alone the judge rendering a decision in their case. Part of the pro bono attorney's job is attempting to overcome this built-in distrust.

NIJC recommends that at least in initial sessions, pro bono attorneys begin by helping the client relax and trust them. Attorneys should be as friendly as possible, explain things thoroughly, and urge the client to ask questions. Pro bono attorneys may find it helpful in establishing trust with their client to share something about themselves. Sometimes the best way to begin a relationship with an NIJC client is to offer coffee or refreshments and simply sit and chat for a few minutes. Attorneys should remember that as human beings, they have many mutual interests in common with their clients – family, friends, etc. Seek these out and state them.

## **2. OVERCOMING CULTURAL BARRIERS**

Cultural and social differences may also create challenges in the process of case preparation. For example, some NIJC clients are from very rural areas and may not be used to describing events in a linear fashion and with the level of detail the attorney typically hears from other clients. Some clients may come from cultural settings in which, for example, calendars or clocks have little value. Clients frequently may not be able to remember what month or even what year an event happened. Such gaps can create serious credibility problems, so pro bono attorneys may need to be creative about establishing a foundation for specific testimony. For example, incidents may need to be tied to the season or a holiday or other events to which the client can relate the occurrence.

Another cultural barrier may be the client's natural reticence about answering questions fully and honestly. Often, a client's only experiences in dealing with well-dressed interrogators sitting behind desks in business offices have been unpleasant and threatening. They may withhold information at first or may modify their story, or concoct one completely, based on their assumptions about what their attorney wants or expects to hear. With patient interviewing and a careful building of trust, a different yet accurate and more credible story may emerge.

## **3. DEALING WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS**

Finally, a more difficult problem may be the presence of psychological barriers, which make case preparation and presentation difficult. A substantial percentage of NIJC clients have been found to be suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or other mental illness, as a result of what they have witnessed or suffered in their home country. From the attorney's point of view, these problems may manifest themselves in a variety of ways. For example:

- The client may have difficulty describing traumatic events and may find the experience so distressing that she simply does not show up at the next appointment or resists efforts to go over the story again;

- The client may display inappropriate behavior or affect while talking about things that happened to her. The most obvious and best-known example is the tendency of many people to relate horrifying events in a flat, seemingly emotionless voice; or
- The client may be suffering from other problems, such as depression or substance abuse, related to or stemming from PTSD or other psychological conditions.

NIJC is associated with the Marjorie Kovler Center, which provides counseling and social services for victims of torture, and has relationships with other social service providers. NIJC strongly recommends that pro bono attorneys alert NIJC staff if they observe behavior in their clients that suggests counseling may be beneficial to the client and/or the case, so that NIJC can provide referrals for evaluation and treatment if necessary and appropriate.

#### 4. INTERVIEWING THROUGH AN INTERPRETER<sup>11</sup>

Interviewing a client through an interpreter is slow and time-consuming. Some standard legal expressions do not translate well into other language and some forms of expressions or questions may be misunderstood. Avoid using legal terms where possible. If the interpreter is a volunteer, the interpreter may have little experience dealing with lawyers. In addition, if the interpreter comes from a different country than the client, differences in dialect or use of certain words can be very critical. Be sure that both the interpreter and the client understand the confidential nature of these interviews. The use of a confidentiality agreement for outside interpreters is recommended.

#### **Step Two: Obtain and Review the Client’s Immigration History**

There is no discovery in immigration court. As a result, information related to a client’s immigration history, including interactions with immigration officials at the border and prior immigration filings, can generally only be obtained via a Freedom of Information Act request and/or by reviewing the immigration court’s file. Note that the immigration court’s file may be different from the DHS file obtained via FOIA, so it is wise to both review the court file and file a FOIA request of the DHS file. If the client is a previously designated unaccompanied immigration child, the attorney should also file a request for an ORR file. Please see the “Additional Information” section of this manual for instructions regarding the FOIA and ORR record requests.

Once the attorney has obtained the client’s immigration records, the attorney should review them carefully, paying particular attention to prior interviews with immigration officers and prior asylum filings and affidavits. It is very common for there to be inconsistencies between a client’s initial immigration interview at the border (which often occurs shortly after the client was apprehended, when the client is exhausted from a long journey, scared, and unsure of her rights and the confidentiality of her statements) and the client’s intake interview with NIJC and subsequent filings. It is also common for the record of initial immigration interviews at the border to include incorrect statements cut-and-pasted from other records.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For more best practices on working with an interpreter, please see NIJC’s interpreter guidance and webinar, linked [here](#).

<sup>12</sup> For example of these cut-and-paste statements, see Elise Foley, “Infants and Toddlers are Coming to the U.S. to Work, According to Border Patrol,” *HuffPost* (June 16, 2015), available at [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/16/border-patrol-babies\\_n\\_7594618.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/16/border-patrol-babies_n_7594618.html).

Where inconsistencies or areas of confusion are found in a client’s prior immigration history, attorneys should discuss these differences with their clients in a non-interrogative manner. In NIJC’s experience, these differences are usually easily explained by the manner in which the interview occurred; the client’s confusion regarding the purpose of the interview; and/or the manner in which documents were prepared. For example, clients who file pro se for asylum often rely on community members to help them draft their asylum applications. These community members may not have reviewed the filing with the client prior to its submission or may have used an incompetent interpreter.

Reviewing these differences with the client will help the attorney determine the best way to address them, if at all. In some cases, the attorney may determine it best to address the perceived inconsistencies in the client’s affidavit. In other cases, the attorney may decide to prepare the client for questioning about the inconsistencies by the asylum officer or on cross-examination, but may decide not to raise them affirmatively. Attorneys with questions about the best way to address inconsistencies in their cases should contact their NIJC point-of-contact.

### **Step Three: Preparing the I-589**

After interviewing the client, the first thing pro bono attorneys should typically do is complete the Form I-589 asylum application, if one has not already been filed. Although some clients will have previously prepared a draft I-589 application on their own, the I-589 is a critical legal document and the final version should be prepared by the attorney in consultation with the client. The form is fairly straightforward, but there are a number of important guidelines to keep in mind:

- Be sure to check the Convention Against Torture box on the first and fifth page of the I-589.
- Include an answer to every question. If the question does not apply or the answer is unknown, write “n/a” or “unknown” rather than leaving the answer blank.
- If the client has a spouse or child who is not in the United States, be sure to check the “no” box in response to the question asking if the spouse or child should be included in the application.
- In response to the substantive questions beginning on page five, simply provide skeletal answers that summarize the response in two – three sentences and then state “affidavit will follow with more information.” There is no benefit to providing a lengthy response to these questions rather than in the affidavit, and it is typically better for the client’s case if the entire story is provided in the client’s affidavit, rather than in piecemeal fashion in the I-589.

### **Step Four: Drafting the Affidavit**

The affidavit is the most important part of an asylum case. Because the client’s credible testimony can be sufficient to sustain her burden of proof **and** because the attorney will often have little control over how the client’s testimony comes out at the asylum office interview or court hearing, the affidavit is often the most significant piece of evidence in support of the case. INA § 208(b)(1)(B)(ii). To establish the client’s credibility, it is important to include sufficient detail in the affidavit and to answer the who, what, where, when, why, and how of the client’s claim. At the same time, it’s also crucial not to include the kinds of details that are not material to the claim and that the client may not remember at the time of the interview or hearing. For example, it’s best to avoid including exact dates or numbers and to use words

like “approximately,” “around,” and “about.” This is because even small inconsistencies can seriously impact the client’s case. An asylum officer or immigration judge may make a credibility determination based on the totality of the circumstances, and all relevant factors, including:

- (1) Demeanor, candor or responsiveness of the applicant or witness
- (2) Inherent plausibility of the applicant or witness’s account
- (3) Consistency between applicant’s or witness’s written or oral statements, whenever made and whether or not under oath, but considering the circumstances under which they were made
- (4) Internal consistency of each statement
- (5) Consistency of such statements with evidence of record and U.S. State Department Reports
- (6) Any inaccuracies or falsehoods contained in the statements, whether or not material to the asylum claim.

INA § 208(b)(1)(B)(iii). Because the affidavit is so important to the asylum case and drafting the affidavit often requires the client to discuss traumatic and sensitive information, the attorney should plan to spend at least four – five substantial meetings with the client to prepare the affidavit. Attorneys can find more tips and best practices for drafting an asylum affidavit on NIJC’s website at <http://immigrantjustice.org/training-webcasts>. NIJC also asks that attorneys forward a draft of their client’s affidavit for review no less than one month in advance of the filing deadline.

Finally, when establishing a client’s credibility, it’s important that the attorney be aware of the client’s immigration history and past statements made to governmental agencies related to the client’s immigration case. Therefore, as noted at the beginning of this manual, one of the first things an attorney should do after accepting an NIJC asylum case is to file a FOIA request with USCIS (as well as an ORR file request if the client entered the United States as an unaccompanied child and was previously detained in ORR custody). See the “Additional Information” section of this manual for FOIA and ORR file request instructions.

## **Step Five: Obtaining Witnesses**

Pro bono attorneys should attempt to obtain additional witnesses besides the client (friends, family, former colleagues or associates, etc.). In affirmative (asylum office) cases, witnesses will not testify at the interview itself. Instead, attorneys who have obtained witnesses will simply submit their declarations or affidavits with the rest of the asylum application package. In defensive cases, pro bono attorneys can choose to simply provide witness affidavits with their pre-hearing materials and have the witness available for testimony at the request of the judge or, if appropriate, they can choose to have their witnesses testify in court along with the client.<sup>13</sup>

### **1. MATERIAL WITNESSES**

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<sup>13</sup> If a witness is not made available to testify in court, DHS may object to the admission of the witness’s affidavit. Because the Federal Rules of Evidence do not apply in immigration court and the standard for the admission of evidence is so low, simply responding that the objection goes to the weight to be given the evidence and not its admission will suffice. The judge will likely give less weight to witness affidavits when the witness is not available to testify. However, there are often strategic reasons why an attorney will not want to make a witness available to testify, despite the diminished weight given to the affidavit.

Material witnesses, such as friends, family members, or others who can corroborate some or all of the client's story, are very important. In some cases, no such witnesses may be available, either because the client does not have access to anyone who can be a useful witness or those who could testify are fearful of doing so. Even if a client initially states that there are no witnesses who can corroborate her claim, the attorney should brainstorm with the client to think of creative options for finding witnesses.

## **2. EXPERT WITNESSES**

Expert witnesses are critical elements in many successful NIJC cases and pro bono attorneys should make a strong effort to obtain such witnesses, particularly if their case is before the immigration court. It is not unusual for an immigration judge to expect that an asylum applicant will have an expert witness to support her case.

Pro bono attorneys should carefully scrutinize the content of a witness's testimony. Testimony should focus on the specific elements of the client's claim. It is not enough that a witness offer general testimony. The witness must be able to specifically corroborate elements of the client's own testimony.

In NIJC's experience, such witnesses are most useful when they are truly experts, such as academics or professionals with substantial scholarly credentials, and when they are not blatantly partisan. Sometimes, pro bono attorneys offer as expert witnesses people who have traveled extensively in their client's country or are active in political or advocacy organizations with a pronounced point of view about that particular country. Others may have active social media profiles that display anti-government opinions. Such witnesses' credentials as unbiased experts are often problematic. In the event that a witness's expertise or objectivity is called into question at the hearing, pro bono attorneys should be prepared to argue on behalf of the expert's credentials or, if unsuccessful, to go forward effectively if the witness is not accepted as an expert. Even if the trial attorney does not object to a particular witness, the immigration judge may refuse to allow such testimony on the court's own motion. Additionally, sometimes, even if allowed to testify, a witness's political bias is so strong and so obvious that their testimony carries little weight with the judge.

If a pro bono attorney's client is suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or other psychological problems that may affect the credibility of her testimony, the attorney should strongly consider obtaining a mental health evaluation from a therapist or psychologist describing the client's symptoms and likely cause and potentially, having that individual testify at the hearing. Similarly, if the client has physical evidence of past persecution or torture on her body, NIJC strongly encourages the attorney to obtain a forensic medical evaluation, documenting this evidence. NIJC can assist the attorney with referrals for both types of evaluations.

### **Step Six: Compiling Corroborating Evidence**

Asylum cases are often made more challenging by the paucity of evidence available to support the client's claim. However, even if a client has little in the way of "standard" evidence to support a claim, such as police reports or witness statements, an attorney can work with the client to find creative ways to corroborate a claim.

The client is largely responsible for persuading the judge that she is credible and truthful. However, the immigration courts generally demand corroborative evidence, making it the second most important part of an asylum claim, after the client's affidavit. Pro bono attorneys should present such

evidence in order to provide general objective support for the client's testimony and bolster her asylum claim. The following are general types of corroborative evidence:

Country Conditions	Client-Specific	Past Persecution	Future Persecution
State Dep't Human Rights Reports	Facts: dates, times, flights, DATE OF ENTRY, IDENTITY	Forensic medical evaluation	Evidence of past incidents that may not rise to persecution
Amnesty Int'l & Human Rights Watch	Physical evidence: pictures, police reports, receipts	Mental health evaluation	Affidavits from similarly situated individuals who have suffered harm
NIJC's online attorney resources & UNHCR Refworld <a href="http://www.unhcr.org/refworld">www.unhcr.org/refworld</a>	Witness affidavits	Medical reports	Expert affidavits (especially for court cases)
Domestic and foreign news sources	Google Earth, hand drawn maps	Pictures	Country conditions

Attorneys should remember that an immigration judge may grant asylum based on the testimony of the applicant alone, but only where the testimony is “credible, is persuasive and refers to specific facts sufficient to demonstrate that the applicant is a refugee.” INA § 208(b)(1)(B)(ii). Furthermore, an immigration judge may require additional evidence to corroborate otherwise credible testimony “unless the applicant does not have the evidence and cannot reasonably obtain the evidence.”<sup>14</sup> *Id.* The judge does not need to provide notice of the need for corroborating evidence. When determining whether the applicant has met her burden of proof, the judge may weigh the credible testimony along with other evidence in the record. *Id.*

Based on these corroboration requirements, pro bono attorneys should be prepared to gather all corroborating evidence reasonably available to support a client’s claim and, where unavailable, a clear explanation as to why the client is unable to obtain the evidence. Whenever possible, the unavailability of evidence should also be supported by corroborating evidence. For example, a client reports that she was arrested together with a close friend. The friend is still in Togo, but remains arbitrarily detained. The client should attempt to obtain a letter, affidavit, or news report that the friend remains in detention, which would explain why the friend’s own affidavit is unavailable.

However, before filing any corroborating documents with the court or DHS, the attorney should ensure that the client can establish the documents’ origin, chain of custody, and authenticate the documents. The client should identify the document and explain how she obtained it. If the document was

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<sup>14</sup> An immigration judge’s finding regarding the availability of corroborating documents is a finding of fact. “No court shall reverse a determination made by a trier of fact with respect to the availability of corroborating evidence, as described in sections 208(b)(1)(B), 240(c)(4)(B), or 241(b)(3)(C), unless the court finds, pursuant to section 242(b)(4)(B), that a reasonable trier of fact is compelled to conclude that such corroborating evidence is unavailable.” INA § 242(b)(4).

mailed from another country, the envelope that it arrived in should be saved and submitted with the asylum filing. Pro bono attorneys who have any doubts about the reliability of a document should consult with NIJC prior to filing it with the court. Any document presented to court could be examined by the federal forensic document lab.

Where an immigration judge requests specific corroborating evidence at a merits hearing, attorneys should consider requesting a continuance to allow the client opportunity to obtain the evidence for the court.

## **1. DOCUMENTS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

All documents in a foreign language must be accompanied by an English translation of the document. The translation should be properly certified. Certification can be accomplished by attaching a signed “Certificate of Translation” which affirms that the translator was fluent in both English and the original language and translated the documents to the best of their ability (a sample certificate of translation can be found [here](#)).

## **2. ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS**

For affirmative proceedings, pro bono attorneys should not file original documents with USCIS. Instead, bring original documents such as birth certificates, travel documents and marriage certificates to the asylum interview. The asylum officer may wish to inspect them.

In defensive proceedings, the pro bono attorney should be prepared to make all original documents that will be submitted in support of the asylum application available to the trial attorney at the hearing upon the trial attorney’s request, along with translations if the original documents are in a foreign language.

## **3. THE ANNOTATED INDEX**

In addition to the corroborating evidence itself, the filing must contain an annotated index of all the supporting documents. The asylum office strongly prefers an annotated index, immigration judges generally require one, and attorneys often find that it becomes a critical piece of their advocacy. In immigration court, attorneys often observe judges quoting directly from the annotated index in their decisions. The index is also often extremely helpful to the attorney when making a closing statement.

The index should set forth the case, highlighting the focus of the material that supports the legal argument. Pro bono attorneys may consider organizing the index according to subheadings that support the arguments in the case and highlighting key evidence in the index in yellow or bold type to help ensure the asylum officer or judge reviews the key evidence. NIJC can provide sample annotated indices upon request.

## **Step Seven: Preparing the Cover Letter or Pre-Hearing Brief<sup>15</sup>**

### **1. ASYLUM OFFICE COVER LETTER**

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<sup>15</sup> Attorneys can find more tips and best practices for drafting asylum office cover letters and immigration court pre-hearing briefs on NIJC’s website [here](#).

Because the asylum office interview is a non-adversarial process, NIJC recommends that pro bono attorneys submit a legal memorandum in the form of a cover letter with the asylum package, rather than a lengthy trial memorandum or brief. The purpose of the cover letter is to summarize the client's claim and eligibility for asylum in a concise manner. Asylum officers report that the applicant's cover letter is most useful to them when it provides a clear overview of the claim because they can then use portions of the letter in their assessment report as to why the asylum office should approve the application. Accordingly, the cover letter should not be lengthy (less than 10 pages) and should primarily articulate the facts that establish the client's asylum eligibility. Pro bono attorneys may find case citations useful in their cover letters for complicated or novel legal arguments, but otherwise may generally omit them.

## **2. PRE-HEARING BRIEF**

If the case is a defensive proceeding before the immigration court, 8 C.F.R. §1003.21(b), and Immigration Court Practice Manual chapter 4.19, require each party to file a pre-hearing brief. The pre-hearing brief should include a statement of the facts, the applicable law, an analysis of the facts based on the law, and a conclusion. The Immigration Court Practice Manual limits the body of the brief to 25 pages. Please see Immigration Court Practice Manual Chapter 4.19 for additional requirements regarding the pre-hearing brief, and Chapter 3 for information regarding the proper way to index, paginate, and tab the pre-hearing document package. A link to the Immigration Court Practice Manual is [here](#).

NIJC asks that all pro bono attorneys provide their pre-hearing briefs for review no less than 14 business days before the attorney intends to file it with the court.

## **Filing the Application and Presenting the Case**

The asylum filing process differs depending on whether the applicant has an affirmative or defensive case. Affirmative asylum applicants generally file a skeletal I-589 asylum application first and then submit all supporting documents one week prior to the asylum office interview. Defensive applicants generally file the I-589 application first and then file all the supporting documents prior to the merits hearing by the filing deadline set by the court. Unless otherwise specified, the brief and all supporting documents should be filed with the immigration court at least 15 days prior to the merits hearing.

## **The Affirmative Process**

### **1. FILING AN AFFIRMATIVE APPLICATION WITH USCIS**

A pro bono attorney representing an affirmative asylum applicant will file the client's asylum package with the Nebraska Service Center. Mailing information for the USCIS Nebraska Service Center (including information for overnight/courier delivery) can be found [here](#).

The affirmative application package must contain the original application with one passport-style photograph; one extra copy of the application; and a copy of the entire original package for each derivative applicant, with a passport photograph of each derivative. For example, a principal applicant



with two derivative children (in the United States) would need to file her original application, one copy, and then an additional copy for each child with the child's passport photo for a total of four filings.<sup>16</sup>

NIJC recommends that attorneys simply file the I-589 application with the passport photograph, the requisite number of copies, and the attorney's G-28 appearance form with the Nebraska Service Center. Then, one week prior to the interview date, the attorney can file all supporting documents (including a legal memorandum in the form of a cover letter, the client's affidavit, an annotated index, corroborating evidence, country condition reports, and any other supporting documentation) directly with the Chicago Asylum Office. This helps to ensure that the Chicago Asylum Office receives the full asylum application package and that documents are not misplaced or improperly rearranged during the file transfer from Nebraska to Chicago.

**Practice Tip:**

NIJC strongly recommends that *pro bono* attorneys not list their own mailing address as the client's mailing address on immigration forms. USCIS often sends correspondence to the client at the listed mailing address, months or years after representation has ended. Moreover, if the attorney has submitted a G-28 appearance form with the application, USCIS will serve a copy of all correspondence on the attorney.

Several weeks after the Service Center receives an I-589 asylum application, it will send the applicant (and the attorney, if a G-28 was included with the application) a receipt notice and a fingerprint ("biometrics") appointment notice. The applicant and attorney will later receive an interview notice, approximately two weeks prior to the interview itself. At present, due to extensive backlogs at the Chicago Asylum Office, the timing of the interview notice is difficult to predict. Clients often wait months, and even years, for an interview. If you wish to expedite your client's interview date, you can email the Chicago Asylum Office and ask to be placed on its cancellation list, or, if your client has compelling humanitarian concerns that warrant an expedited date, you can file a Motion to Expedite. If you would like to pursue either of these options, please reach out to NIJC for additional guidance.

## **2. FINGERPRINTS**

If an asylum applicant is filing affirmatively, USCIS will send a fingerprint appointment notice to the applicant without any prompting from the applicant or the pro bono attorney. USCIS will mail the notice several weeks – or months - after it receives the I-589 application and the notice will instruct the applicant to go to a specific Application Support Center (ASC) to take her fingerprints. NIJC recommends that pro bono attorneys advise their clients of this process and instruct the clients to contact the attorney when she receives a date for fingerprinting.

If a pro bono attorney believes that a client has accrued a criminal record, the attorney should contact NIJC. NIJC may recommend that the attorney and client send a separate FOIA request to the FBI, so that they will know what is in the record.

## **3. FILING THE SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS**

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<sup>16</sup> In 2019, NIJC began recommending that attorneys file separate, independent asylum applications for all derivative applicants as well, in order to ensure their ability to seek protection is fully protected.

One week prior to the asylum interview, the attorney should file the supporting documentation package, plus one copy of the package, directly with the Chicago Asylum Office. As noted above, this filing should include the following:

#### **Asylum Office Supporting Document Filing Checklist**

- Legal memorandum in the form of a cover letter
- An annotated index of all supporting documents, following by supporting documents that include:
  - A detailed client affidavit, with a translator's certificate if necessary
  - Other witness affidavits, with translator certificates if necessary
  - Identity documents
  - Evidence corroborating relevant facts (employment; relationships; place of residence; political or religious affiliation; etc.)
  - Evidence of claimed relationship for all included derivative family members
  - Evidence of physical or mental harm
  - Corroborating country condition evidence
- Any updates to the I-589 application, and other evidence as needed

In addition, make sure

- All documents in a foreign language are translated and include a certificate of translation
- The entire package is single-sided and two-hole punched at the top
- The documents are consecutively paginated
- The supporting documents have alphabetical tabs on the right-hand side

NIJC recommends that attorneys hand-deliver the filing when possible and bring an additional copy (for a total of three copies) to be date-stamped for the attorney's records.

#### **4. THE ASYLUM INTERVIEW**

The pro bono attorney should accompany the client to the interview; however, attorneys have very limited roles. The asylum officer will question the client regarding the veracity of the contents of the application and her claim for asylum. At the end of the interview, the attorney will be allowed to present a short closing argument on behalf of the client.

The asylum office interview is informal and usually occurs in an office. If the client is not fluent in English, the asylum office will provide a telephonic interpreter for most languages and, in most situations, will not allow an in-person interpreter to be provided by the attorney/applicant. A list of languages provided by the asylum office can be found [here](#). If client's language is not included on this list, the pro bono attorney must arrange for an interpreter to attend the interview. The pro bono attorney may not serve as the interpreter, and NIJC strongly recommends that a family member of the applicant not serve as the interpreter during the interview either.

Normally, the asylum officer first tries to make the applicant feel comfortable and will confirm that that information obtained during the interview is confidential with the U.S. government. The officer reviews the asylum application with the applicant to ensure that all the information is correct and accurate. If any information on the application requires changes or updates, the attorney should raise the changes before the asylum officer begins the review process. If the application requires significant

changes or updates, NIJC recommends that the attorney prepare a written list of the changes or updates and submit the list to the officer at the beginning of the interview.

The asylum officer will ask the client questions that most often will come directly from the client's affidavit regarding her experiences and the reasons she fears returning to her home country. Sometimes the questions are open-ended, i.e., "why are you afraid to return to Kenya?" Other times, the questions are specific, i.e., "what happened to you on October 6, 1999?" Most asylum interviews last anywhere from two to four hours.

The role of the attorney during the asylum interview is very limited. The pro bono attorney may interrupt the interview if the attorney feels that the applicant did not understand the question or if a question is inappropriate. The attorney should ask to stop the interview and speak to a supervisor if the interviewing officer's behavior is inappropriate. The attorney should also take detailed notes during the interview because this will be the only record of the interview the attorney will have if the applicant's case is referred to court. At the end of the interview, the attorney will be asked or can request to make a short closing statement on behalf of the applicant. During the closing statement, the attorney should explain to the asylum officer why the client is eligible for asylum and the enumerated grounds applicable to the client's claim. The attorney should also direct the asylum officer to any document that is particularly supportive of the applicant's case or that the attorney believes should be given particular attention.

In some cases, at the end of the interview, the asylum officer will request that the applicant return to pick up her decision. In most cases, however, the asylum officer provides the applicant with a notice stating that the decision will be mailed. Decisions are often mailed out several weeks – or even months – after the interview. When the applicant and attorney go to the asylum office to pick up the decision, the applicant must bring a photo ID and the notice given to her by the asylum officer after her interview, indicating the time and date the decision will be ready for pick up. At that time, the applicant and attorney will simply pick up the decision from the receptionist at the window. They will not meet with an asylum officer, but it is still important that the attorney accompany the client to ensure that all the paperwork is correct and that the client understands the decision. Asylum applications that are not approved are referred to the immigration court for *de novo* review.

## **The Defensive Process**

To practice before the immigration court, attorneys must first register with EOIR's E-Registry system. All attorneys currently practicing before EOIR must complete the E-Registry process immediately or risk suspension before EOIR until the registration process has been completed.

To register, attorneys must first complete an online profile and will then receive a unique EOIR ID number, which they must use when completing the E-28 appearance form.<sup>17</sup> After completing the online registration, attorneys can appear in person at the immigration court to complete the identification verification process, or they can complete the verification process remotely following the instructions

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<sup>17</sup> The multiplicity of forms in immigration practice is staggering. The E-28 form is similar in content to the E-27 form. Form G-28 is only for use in DHS administrative proceedings, not in the immigration courts. The form E-28 must be filed in proceedings before the immigration judge. And the form E-27 must be filed in appeal proceedings before the BIA - even if the same attorney has a form E-28 on file in the same case.

found [here](#). For more information about the E-Registry system and the identification verification process, please [click here](#).

An attorney should complete the EOIR registration process as soon as possible after accepting a defensive asylum applicant for representation so that the attorney can file an appearance with the Court and begin to receive any Court correspondence. All attorneys representing a client in court must file an E-28 appearance form with the Court. If the client has an electronic record of proceedings (EROP), the E28 must be filed electronically; if the client has a paper record of proceedings, the E28 can be filed electronically or in hard copy. A copy of anything filed with the court must also be served on the Office of Chief Counsel. To determine whether you need to file electronically, you can call the Chicago immigration court or check the court's online filing system, found [here](#).

## **1. FILING A DEFENSIVE APPLICATION WITH THE COURT**

If the asylum office referred a pro bono attorney's client to the immigration court, the judge should already have a copy of the I-589 application package from the asylum office in the court file. If, however, the client is in immigration court removal proceedings and has not yet filed for asylum, she must submit her I-589 asylum application with the court within one year of her arrival in the United States.

As previously noted, since September 2016, defensive asylum applications can be filed during a Master Calendar (status) hearing, at the immigration court window, by mail, or electronically if the client's case has an electronic record.<sup>18</sup> For purposes of the one-year deadline, "filed by" means received by the immigration court. As with any document filed with the immigration court, the attorney must include a certificate of service with the asylum application and serve a copy of the application on the Office of Chief Counsel.

## **2. THE MASTER CALENDAR HEARING**

The "Master Calendar" hearing is a preliminary hearing at which the non-citizen pleads to the charges on the Notice to Appear (NTA) and formally requests the type of relief sought. The Master Calendar hearing functions much like an arraignment in criminal proceedings. Unless there are complications in the case, the Master Calendar hearing is normally a routine proceeding that usually takes much less than an hour to complete, although the attorney and client may have a significant wait before the hearing begins. At immigration court Master Calendar hearings, the non-citizen must appear unless

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<sup>18</sup> Prior to September 2016, asylum applications were only deemed filed when they were received in open court. As a result, and due to a class action settlement related to this issue and the asylum clock, individuals were permitted to "lodge" an asylum application at the court window prior to a Master Calendar hearing date. To "lodge" an asylum application, an individual or attorney would present a completed asylum application at the court window, a clerk would stamp the date and "lodged" on the application, and return it to the individual or attorney. A copy of the application was not kept in the client's court file. Although judges were instructed to consider the lodging date when determining whether an individual who did not timely file the asylum application during a hearing could meet an exception to the one-year filing deadline for asylum, individuals who did not have a court hearing prior to their one-year deadline were left in an uncertain position regarding the one-year deadline. Thus, for clients who were not scheduled for a Master Calendar hearing until after their one-year deadline, NIJC and *pro bono* attorneys regularly "lodged" clients' asylum applications and then filed a motion requesting that the Court accepted the lodged date as the filing date. If an attorney is representing a client whose asylum application was "lodged" with the Court prior to September 2016 and the attorney is unclear whether or not the application was filed with the Court, please contact NIJC.

her appearance has been explicitly waived by the judge. Some judges permit telephonic or webex hearings, so please check with your NIJC point of contact for additional information about these options.

**a. Notice of the Master Calendar Hearing**

The immigration court should send the client written notice of the date and time for the Master Calendar hearing on a hearing notice. Due to extensive backlogs at the Chicago immigration court, however, clients are not always receiving these written notices. To determine whether the client has an upcoming hearing date, the pro bono attorney should call the court's automated hotline or enter the client's A number into the court's automated case information page, found [here](#). A client's Master Calendar hearing notice is not to be confused with the Notice to Appear, which is the charging document. Sometimes, however, although rarely nowadays, the Notice to Appear may also serve as the hearing notice and will list the hearing date and time.

**b. Arriving at the Court**

Master Calendar hearings are held at the Chicago Immigration Court, 525 W. Van Buren Street, Suite 500 Chicago, IL 60607.<sup>19</sup> Although the court lists specific times for Master Calendar hearings on the hearing notices, the judges hear Master Calendar hearings on a first-come, first-serve basis in the morning and then in the afternoon. NIJC recommends that pro bono attorneys and their clients arrive early to court to be among the first to sign up for the calendar call; this will help to minimize the waiting time in court.<sup>20</sup>

After attorneys and clients reach the fifth floor of 525 W. Van Buren Street and go through security, attorneys must sign their name and the client's name and A Number on the sign-in sheet on a bulletin board in the waiting area. The judge's clerk will call the attorneys and escort them to the judge's courtroom, so attorneys will need to listen for their name to be called.

If the pro bono attorney has not already filed an appearance, the attorney should do so at the Master Calendar hearing by bringing two completed copies of form E-28 to court or obtaining two copies from the clerk's window, filling them out, and serving one on the trial attorney and filing one with the judge. However, the attorney must have completed the [e-registry process](#) prior to the hearing date in order to file an appearance.

**c. Attendance of the Client**

Please note that the client must attend all hearings before the immigration court, including the Master Calendar hearing; the attorney cannot appear alone. The judge can order the client removed *in absentia*, if she fails to appear. Also, every person who has been issued an NTA must attend. This applies to small children as well; their parent(s) cannot attend for them. The pro bono attorney may ask the immigration judge to waive the presence of children at future hearings as long as they are represented, but it is discretionary and not automatically granted. If there is a compelling reason why a client cannot appear in person, the attorney can file a motion to waive the client's appearance in advance of the hearing, but there is no guarantee that such a motion will be granted.

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<sup>19</sup> The Chicago Detained Immigration Court holds hearings for detained noncitizens at 536 S. Clark Street, Chicago.  
<sup>20</sup> Fortunately for NIJC pro bono attorneys, persons represented by counsel are called to appear before the court first; unrepresented people are heard afterwards.

#### **d. The Immigration Judge**

The judge who presides over the client's Master Calendar hearing will usually be the judge who conducts the hearing on the merits and decides all motions. (In contrast, the trial attorney present at the client's Master Calendar hearing will most likely not be the same trial attorney for the client's merits hearing.) Pro bono attorneys should note that their hearing strategies and their client's chances of success depend in large part on which judge hears their case. After appearing at a Master Calendar hearing, pro bono attorneys should confer with NIJC about the judge presiding over their case.

#### **e. Interpreters**

In immigration court, the court provides the interpreter for the hearing. The quality and reliability of the court interpreters can be highly variable. At the merits hearing, the interpreter will be in person. However, the court does not provide an in-person interpreter for non-Spanish languages at the Master Calendar hearing because there is typically little, if any, communication with the client. If a non-Spanish interpreter is needed at the Master Calendar hearing, the judge will use a phone interpretation service. If interpretation is impossible in court for the Master Calendar hearing and necessary for the client, attorneys may request a continued hearing.

In addition, at the Master Calendar hearing, pro bono attorneys should state for the record whether they will require an interpreter at the merits hearing and specify whether a particular dialect is required. For languages like Arabic where the dialect can differ dramatically country-to-country, NIJC recommends that the attorney specify the country as well as the language (e.g. Moroccan Arabic). If the pro bono attorney suspects at any time that the interpreter and client do not understand each other or that interpretation errors have occurred, the attorney should be sure to make the court aware of the problem and object where appropriate. If necessary, the attorney should request a continuance so that the court can find a new interpreter.

#### **f. The Beginning of the Master Calendar Hearing**

When the client's case is called, the immigration judge is likely to talk with the attorney off the record to determine the attorney's intentions and to straighten out any procedural problems. At that time, the attorney can advise the judge that they are an NIJC pro bono attorney. On the record, through an interpreter where necessary, the judge will state the nature of the proceedings and ask the client if she understands what is happening.

#### **g. Determining Representation by Counsel**

The judge will first ask the client if the attorney is her representative. If an individual appears without counsel, the judge will usually ask the individual if she would like a continuance in order to seek legal counsel.

#### **h. Establishing Receipt of the Notice to Appear**

The judge will ask the attorney or the client if the client has received a copy of the NTA. If not, she should say so and ask for a copy. The judge will often grant continuances so that the attorney can go over the NTA with the client to determine whether the charges are correct—and if there is any question, even remotely, about their accuracy, then the attorney should seek a continuance.

**i. Admitting or Denying the Charges and Conceding Removability**

If the attorney has the NTA, the judge will ask the client to either admit or deny the specific charges in the NTA—namely, that she entered without inspection on a certain date or overstayed her visa and is removable.<sup>21</sup> The attorney will also be asked to either contest or concede removability as charged on the NTA. In order to be eligible to apply for asylum, the client, through the attorney, must admit removability under one of the grounds. However, if there is more than one charge of removability, discuss it with the client and with NIJC staff.<sup>22</sup>

**j. Designating a Country of Removal**

Next, the judge will ask if the client wishes to designate a country of removal. In asylum cases, the pro bono attorney should state that the client does not wish to do so. The judge will then identify the client’s home country as the country of removal.

If the trial attorney or judge designates a country other than the one from which the client is seeking asylum, the attorney should register opposition on the record.

**k. Stating the Client’s Desire to Apply for Asylum**

The attorney or the client will then state for the record that the client wishes to apply for asylum, withholding of removal and/or CAT.

**l. Setting a Date for Submission of the Written Asylum Application**

If the client has not yet filed an asylum application, the judge will usually set a date for submission of the completed written asylum application. The attorney should be sure that the date the judge sets for submission of the I-589 application is prior to the client’s one-year filing deadline. Unless the judge specifically asks for additional documents, the attorney must only submit the I-589 asylum application at the specified date and not any supporting documentation, so that the client is not tied to any statements or documentation before the attorney and client have had sufficient time to develop the case.

If the client previously filed for asylum with the asylum office and is now renewing her application before the immigration court, the judge will likely indicate that any amendments to the I-589 asylum application should be tendered to the court at the same time as other pre-trial submissions prior to the merits hearing. There is no need to submit a new I-589 application if the client has already filed one and the judges generally prefer that attorneys do not submit new I-589 applications unless the initial

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<sup>21</sup> Often, NIJC clients were first detained in Texas or California, and as part of changing venue to Chicago, they have already pleaded to the charges in the NTA, admitted to removability, and possibly, submitted a written asylum application. In such cases, appearance at the local Master Calendar will involve nothing more than simply setting a merits hearing date and, occasionally, a deadline for submission of supplementary documentation with the asylum application.

<sup>22</sup> Clients who have reasonable grounds to challenge removability are unlikely to become NIJC clients under the asylum project; rather, they would be referred to other projects within NIJC. However, if in the course of interviewing the client some fact is revealed that may impact the client’s removability, the pro bono attorney should consult with NIJC staff.

application is illegible or was prepared without the client’s knowledge of the information provided in the application.

**m. Setting the Date and Amount of Time for the Merits Hearing**

The date of the hearing on the merits of the claim will generally be set several months to several years out. The immigration judge may ask whether the pro bono attorney and client would like an expedited or non-expedited hearing date. Some asylum applicants have the right to request an expedited hearing because the law states that the court must adjudicate an asylum applicant’s claim within 180 days from the date the asylum application is received by either USCIS or the immigration court (if applicant did not previously file with the USCIS). INA § 208(d)(5)(A)(iii). However, due to delays at the asylum office and immigration court, most asylum applicants do not fall within this category.

If a client is eligible for an expedited hearing, the immigration judge may only offer one expedited date. The client and attorney can either accept that date or decline and take a non-expedited date instead. It is important for the attorney to speak to NIJC prior to the master calendar hearing to determine the judge’s practice. It is also crucial that the client understand the importance of being fully prepared for asylum hearings and that the attorney recommend to the client that she waive her right to an expedited hearing if the expedited date will not allow for enough preparation time. If the client waives her right to an expedited hearing, the judge will likely schedule the client for a merits hearing date one to three years into the future and the client may not be eligible for employment authorization during this time. As a result, the attorney **MUST** discuss these possibilities with the client **BEFORE** the hearing so that the client is prepared at the time of the Master Calendar hearing.

Whatever date the judge sets, the judge will schedule the hearing for either three or four hours. An attorney should not hesitate to ask for more time if they think they will need it, but generally, most judges are unwilling or unable to schedule more than four hours for a merits hearing. Once the hearing date is set, the Master Calendar hearing is adjourned.

If the pro bono attorney is representing a detained client, the attorney and client will receive an expedited hearing date. Detained individuals typically have their final hearing date set one or two months out.

**3. PREPARING FOR THE MERITS HEARING**

Merits hearings in asylum cases are formal, adversarial, evidentiary hearings on the record. Trial attorneys act as “prosecutors,” attempting to disprove the applicant’s eligibility for asylum. Witnesses are sworn, and both sides have the opportunity for direct and cross-examination. Immigration judges are usually also very involved in questioning the client. Although removal hearings are similar to other trials in many ways, there is minimal discovery or motion practice, and the rules of evidence and procedure are relatively relaxed.

**a. Fingerprints (“biometrics”)**

Unlike the affirmative process, in defensive asylum proceedings (before the immigration court), the applicant and her attorney are responsible for requesting a fingerprint appointment, unless the applicant is detained or was previously fingerprinted related to the asylum application. Please see below for a chart regarding when an attorney should submit a fingerprint appointment request for a client.



<b>If the client:</b>	<b>Should the attorney request a fingerprint appointment?</b>
Is applying for asylum before the asylum office.	No. USCIS will automatically send a fingerprint appointment notice to the client after the asylum application is filed.
Is seeking asylum before the immigration court <u>after</u> the asylum office referred the case to the court.	Most likely, the client will not need to be re-printed because the client has already been printed in connection with the asylum application before her asylum office interview. To be on the safe side, the attorney can email the ICE Office of the Principal Legal Advisor to confirm that fingerprints do not need to be retaken. The email address is: <a href="mailto:OPLA-CHI-SupportStaff@ice.dhs.gov">OPLA-CHI-SupportStaff@ice.dhs.gov</a> .
Is seeking asylum before the immigration court and is detained.	No. DHS is responsible for ensuring that detainees are fingerprinted prior to the detained merits hearing.
Is seeking asylum before the immigration court and never applied for asylum before the asylum office.	Yes. The attorney must request a fingerprint appointment by following the instructions below. The request should be made as soon as possible after the asylum application is received in open court, but no later than 180 days before the merits hearing.
Is seeking asylum before the immigration court, never applied for asylum before the asylum office, but was fingerprinted when she was apprehended at the border or when she applied for an employment authorization document.	Yes. In order for OCC to re-run a client's fingerprints, the client must have had her fingerprints taken at an Application Support Center (ASC) specifically related to the application for relief that is before the court. The attorney must request a fingerprint appointment by following the instructions below. The request should be made as soon as possible after the asylum application is received in open court, but no later than 180 days before the merits hearing.
Is seeking asylum before the immigration court, never applied for asylum before the asylum office, but submitted a fingerprint appointment request four years ago after filing for asylum with the court, and was fingerprinted by an ASC.	No. The OCC trial attorney will simply re-run the client's fingerprints prior to the merits hearing. If, for some reason, the trial attorney cannot use those fingerprints, OCC will coordinate with USCIS to issue a fingerprint appointment to the client.

To request a fingerprint appointment, the pro bono attorney must send a copy of the instructions for providing biometric and biographic information (located [here](#)) with the first three pages of the I-589 and a G-28 to the Nebraska Service Center. This should be done immediately after the asylum application is received in open court (or immediately after the first master calendar hearing if the client was referred to court by the asylum office), but must be done no later than 180 days before the scheduled merits hearing. The Service Center will issue an appointment notice directing the client to appear to be fingerprinted at the Application Support Center closest to her home address.

When the client goes to the ASC to get her fingerprints taken, the ASC will date stamp the client's fingerprint appointment notice as proof that it took her fingerprints. NIJC recommends that pro bono attorneys make a copy of this stamped notice and bring it to the merits hearing in case there are any questions as to whether the client attended her fingerprints appointment. After the ASC takes the client's fingerprints, DHS will then send the fingerprints to the FBI in order to obtain the applicant's record.

If an attorney has submitted a fingerprint appointment request and after one month, the Nebraska Service Center has not yet responded, please contact NIJC. **If the attorney was responsible for requesting a fingerprint appointment for a client and the client has not been fingerprinted by the time of the merits hearing, the immigration judge cannot issue a decision. Furthermore, the judge can consider the application abandoned and deny the client's asylum petition.**

Due to the extremely negative consequences of failing to obtain a fingerprint appointment, NIJC recommends that after accepting an NIJC asylum case, the attorney immediately determine whether a fingerprint appointment is necessary and if it is, file the request as soon as possible.

### **b. Filing the Pre-Hearing Materials**

The Immigration Court Practice Manual now requires that all pre-hearing materials be filed **15 calendar days**<sup>23</sup> prior to the merits hearing, unless the judge set a different deadline. Prior to the filing deadline, the attorney must file the supporting documents with the Chicago Immigration Court and serve one copy on the Office of Chief Counsel. As noted above, this filing should include the following:

#### **Immigration Court Supporting Document Filing Checklist**

- Legal brief
- An annotated index of all supporting documents, following by supporting documents that include:
  - A notice of any amendments to form I-589
  - A detailed client affidavit, with a translator's certificate if necessary
  - Other witness affidavits, with translator certificates if necessary
  - Identity documents
  - Evidence corroborating relevant facts (employment; relationships; place of residence; political or religious affiliation; etc.)
  - Evidence of claimed relationship for all included, derivative family members
  - Evidence of physical or mental harm
  - Corroborating country condition evidence
- Other evidence as needed

In addition, make sure

- To translate all documents in a foreign language and include a certificate of translation
- To print one side only
- The entire package is two-hole punched at the top and secured with a metal-prong fastener
- The documents are consecutively paginated

<sup>23</sup> Please note that the prior administration changed the filing deadline to 30 days. In December 2021, EOIR changed the deadline back to 15 days. Please see the [EOIR Policy Manual](#) for more information.

- ❑ The supporting documents have alphabetical tabs on the right-hand side
- ❑ To retain all original photographs and identity documents unless instructed to produce them
- ❑ To include a certificate of service and serve a copy on the Office of Chief Counsel (via their eService portal, or by mail to 525 W. Van Buren Street, Suite 701, Chicago, IL 60607). For more information about the eService portal, please go to [http://immigrantjustice.org/admin\\_policy/blog/new-online-filing-system-ice-office-chief-counsel](http://immigrantjustice.org/admin_policy/blog/new-online-filing-system-ice-office-chief-counsel).

As noted above, if the asylum application or other previously filed materials contain substantial errors or incorrect information, or if the previous application needs substantial updates, NIJC recommends that attorneys submit a “notice of amendments” with their other pre-hearing submissions. This notice should list the errors, the correct information and possibly, an explanation as to why the errors occurred.

### c. Preparing the Client to Testify

It is important that pro bono attorneys explain the hearing process in detail to their clients, so that they understand what will occur and what is expected of them at the merits hearing, as well as the potential outcomes. First, the attorney should explain the format and set-up of the hearing, including who will be in the courtroom, where everyone will sit, and the typical dress code for a hearing.

Second, the attorney should make sure the client understands what they need to establish in order to get asylum and how the attorney views the client’s claim to fit within that framework. It is particularly important that the client understand the nexus, unable/unwilling to control, and relocation elements and how the government attorney may try to undercut these parts of the claim. **The more the client understands about what the attorney is trying to prove to the judge, the better equipped the client will be to testify in her own case.**

Third, pro bono attorneys should be aware that it is very common for witnesses to vary their testimony on the stand from what they have stated in their pre-hearing preparation interviews. They often fail to testify about certain things (sometimes key elements) and/or may suddenly state new facts that the attorney has never heard before. In addition, all witnesses, particularly asylum applicants, are generally very nervous and thus likely to forget certain things. For example, clients often forget dates or even years in which events happened. Though this is quite normal human behavior, both trial attorneys and immigration judges tend to think that if a client cannot remember in which year an important event occurred, then the client is not credible.<sup>24</sup> Remember, as explained earlier, an immigration judge can make a credibility determination based on a wide range of factors. *See* INA § 208(b)(1)(B)(iii).

As a result of this credibility standard and the likelihood that the client’s testimony may vary on the stand, it is important that the attorney spend sufficient time preparing the client for the hearing. NIJC recommends that pro bono attorneys plan for three trial preparation sessions with their client that practice both direct and cross-examination. After building trust with the client, it is important that pro bono attorneys mentally prepare their client to face seemingly hostile questioning from the trial attorney and judge. Similarly, before putting anyone else on the stand, it is important that the attorney prepare the witness.

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<sup>24</sup> Where an immigration judge fails to make an explicit credibility finding, the respondent and any witnesses enjoy a rebuttable presumption of credibility. INA § 208(b)(1)(B)(iii).

#### **d. Contacting the Trial Attorney Prior to the Merits Hearing**

DHS is represented by one of the trial attorneys from the local Office of the Chief Counsel. The OCC trial attorney represents the government and generally plays an adversarial role at the merits hearing. Trial attorneys are assigned to particular judges and hearing days on a month-by-month basis, as opposed to being assigned to a particular case, and so they often do not review a case more than a few days prior to a merits hearing. For this reason, NIJC advises pro bono attorneys to contact opposing counsel after they have filed their pre-hearing brief and supporting documents, about a week before the hearing, to see if opposing counsel will be willing to stipulate to any elements of the asylum claim or narrow the issues for trial. During this discussion, the attorney should try to get a sense of any weaknesses that OCC perceives in the case or any procedural issues (e.g., problems with the background check) that may delay the hearing.

### **4. MERITS HEARING PROCEDURE**

#### **a. Rules of Procedure**

Merits hearings in immigration court are comparable to administrative law proceedings in other federal or state agencies. However, immigration proceedings are not governed by the Administrative Procedures Act (APA), and tend to be more informal than those governed by APA standards.

#### **b. Rules of Evidence**

In immigration court, the Federal Rules of Evidence do not apply; rather, the test is whether the evidence is “probative and its admission is fundamentally fair.” *Doumbia v. Gonzales*, 472 F.3d 957, 962 (7th Cir. 2007). Formal presentation of evidence is generally not required. Judges will simply admit documents or physical evidence, sometimes permitting argument but rarely requiring formal authentication. Similarly, objections to evidence, particularly hearsay objections, are rarely made or upheld depending on the trial attorney and judge.

Generally, this very flexible view of the rules of evidence works to the advantage of the client. Asylum applicants are rarely able to offer evidence beyond their own testimony that would stand up to rigorous rules of evidence. For example, it is generally understood that producing a third-party declarant or formally authenticating a document is simply out of the question, particularly in the case of an asylum applicant who fled for her life. Thus, many kinds of evidence that would present difficult issues in other courts may be easily admissible in immigration court.

The client and other witnesses may testify freely about what other people told them. Letters from friends or family members may often be introduced with little difficulty (though not always), as long as they are accompanied by translations. Documentary evidence, such as newspaper articles and general treatises are routinely admitted without objection. Thus, pro bono attorneys should not shy away from attempting to admit any evidence as long as an argument can be made that it is probative of the client's claim in some fashion. Needless to say, however, the immigration judge will give all of the evidence the weight that the judge thinks it deserves. Particularly marginal evidence may be admitted by the judge but viewed with a great deal of skepticism.

#### **c. The Record**

As with the Master Calendar hearings, the formal record of the case is made on digital recording system, controlled by the judge, who may stop and start recording at will. Although it has not often been a problem in Chicago, attorneys should be alert for instances of judges capriciously turning the recording off. If necessary, pro bono attorneys should be ready to restate objections on the record and clearly note that the judge turned off the recorder inappropriately. Remember that the digital recording system is the official record of what goes on in the courtroom.

It is always a good idea to make certain that names of people, places, and organizations are spelled clearly for the record. Transcriptions of hearing tapes are often of poor quality, and transcribers frequently have a difficult time transcribing words in foreign languages or anything associated with other countries. For languages that do not use a Roman alphabet, phonetic spelling will have to be used. It should be noted for the record that the spelling is phonetic and approximate.

#### **d. The Immigration Judge**

Judges in asylum hearings play a very active role and almost always engage in extensive direct and cross-examination of the client. Each Chicago Immigration Judge conducts hearings in their own particular style. Pro bono attorneys should consult with NIJC for information about a particular judge.

#### **e. The DHS Trial Attorney**

As previously noted, DHS is represented by one of the trial attorneys from the local Office of the Chief Counsel.

#### **f. Interpreters**

As previously noted, the court will provide the interpreter to be used at the court hearing. For the merits hearing, pro bono attorneys should have their own interpreter present to ensure that they can communicate with their client during the hearing and so that the interpreter can flag errors in translation that can be corrected or objected to in a timely manner during the proceedings.

#### **g. General Logistics of the Hearing**

In most courtrooms, the respondent and her attorney sit at the table on the right side of the room (facing the judge's bench), while the trial attorney sits on the left. How testimony is conducted depends on the judge. Some require the witnesses to take the witness stand next to the bench, while others permit the client to remain seated next to the attorney. Some judges ask attorneys to conduct examinations from a podium, while others do not.

Removal hearings are generally open to the public. However, due to COVID-related public health measures, the immigration court may limit the number of individuals allowed in the courtroom at one time. Asylum hearings can also be closed to the public at the request of the respondent. Witnesses in either kind of proceeding are almost always excluded from the courtroom on the government's motion.

### **5. THE MERITS HEARING**

#### **a. Arriving at the Court<sup>25</sup>**

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<sup>25</sup> Certain Chicago Immigration Judges are conducting merits hearings via Webex. For more information about which judges are holding Webex hearings, please consult NIJC.

Asylum hearings usually begin promptly, so pro bono attorneys and their client should arrive at the Chicago Immigration Court well in advance of the scheduled time. After arriving at the immigration court, the pro bono attorney should first report to the clerk at the window to acknowledge that the client is present and ready to go for a hearing before a particular judge. The clerk will ask the attorney and client to wait until the courtroom is opened.

**b. Off the Record Formalities**

Before the start of the hearing, the judge will generally engage in a substantial amount of off-the-record conversation, reviewing the file, identifying exhibits, and clarifying issues, such as the status of previously filed motions, or the number of witnesses the respondent will call.

**c. Correcting and Updating Information**

At the beginning of the hearing on the record, the judge generally gives the respondent's attorney a chance to update or correct any information on the asylum application or other materials previously submitted. It is important to make certain that names, addresses, dates, A-numbers, etc. are up-to-date and correct. As noted above, any corrections to the asylum application should generally be submitted with the pre-hearing filing. If they were not, those corrections will need to be made at the beginning of the hearing.

**d. Identifying and Admitting Exhibits**

Next, the judge will go through the process of admitting exhibits. Generally, the Notice to Appear and related materials have already been admitted as initial exhibits and the asylum application along with all attached materials will be identified and admitted as a group exhibit. The government trial attorney rarely submits any evidence, other than the State Department Human Rights Report. After identifying all offered exhibits, the judge will ask if there are any objections. There are generally few objections to the evidence, other than by the trial attorney to the affidavits of witnesses who are unavailable for cross-examination. If the trial attorney does object to a particular piece of evidence, the judge will usually permit brief arguments and rule quickly. Occasionally, specific items such as expert witness affidavits or curriculum vitae, or pieces of direct evidence, such as letters or documents, will draw objections that the judge is not comfortable ruling on at that point. In that situation, the judge may instead reserve the ruling until the attorney presents the evidence during the hearing.

**e. Opening Statements**

Most of the judges at the Chicago Immigration Court will permit opening statements, although the judge may indicate that an opening statement is not necessary. Opening statements, where permitted, can be helpful in reminding the judge of the issues in the case before testimony begins. Pro bono attorneys should be aware that opening statements in immigration court are extremely brief – no more than one or two minutes – and should simply summarize the client's case.

**f. Direct Examination**

Examination of witnesses in immigration court is largely the same as in other courts. The respondent's attorney offers the client's case first, conducting direct examination, then the trial attorney conducts a cross-examination, and then the respondent's attorney can conduct redirect where necessary. Generally, witnesses must be present in court. However, if a witness is located in another part of the

country or the world, most of the immigration judges allow telephonic or video testimony by witnesses if the attorney files a timely motion for telephonic or video testimony.

Attorneys should be well prepared for direct examination and the client should be well rehearsed in how to conduct herself. The client should be advised to answer questions succinctly without engaging in long narratives, and should state clearly when she does not understand a question. NIJC recommends that attorneys practice direct examination with the client numerous times so that the client feels well-prepared during the hearing. The earlier section regarding preparing a client's testimony provides practice tips for doing so.

Generally, direct examinations should track the client's affidavit since the judge will often read along in the client's affidavit as the client testifies. However, since asylum hearings are brief, typically scheduled for three or four hour time slots, pro bono attorneys should prepare direct examination with an eye on the clock.<sup>26</sup> Attorneys should get preliminary information out as quickly as possible and eliminate duplicative information.

Trial attorneys will object to leading questions in the direct examination and the judge will generally sustain the objection. To avoid time-consuming arguments regarding leading questions, pro bono attorneys should simply prepare the client in advance on how to answer non-leading questions. However, do not have the client memorize a prepared direct examination because it can make the real direct examination sound scripted and the client seem less credible.

#### **g. Cross-Examination**

After direct examination, the trial attorney will conduct cross-examination, generally focusing on credibility. In cases involving Central American and Mexican asylum seekers, the trial attorney will also usually focus on the nexus, unable/unwilling to control, and relocation elements and attorneys should prepare clients to understand these elements so they can respond appropriately on cross. Again, though there are essentially no rules of procedure or evidence, pro bono attorneys should raise objections when the questioning is inappropriate. Redirect is permissible and strongly recommended where cross-examination has raised damaging issues. A cross-examination will differ significantly depending on the trial attorney; attorneys should contact NIJC for information on the specific trial attorney in their case.

#### **h. Examination by the Immigration Judge**

All the immigration judges will usually conduct their own extensive examination, generally after both attorneys complete direct and cross. Some judges, however, will interrupt direct and cross-examination repeatedly and extensively, which can disrupt the flow of the attorney's questions and rattle the client. The judge's examination can present serious problems. Sometimes, the questions are such that, if they were asked by an attorney in any other court proceeding, they would be subject to strong objections. However, since the judge is doing the questioning, and typically believes the court has a duty to actively question the respondent, there may be little pro bono attorney can do about it. Where questions are inappropriate or offensive, the attorney should attempt to state objections on the record and make note of the issue for purposes of an appeal, if necessary.

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<sup>26</sup> Some judges are willing to schedule additional hearing time at a later date if it becomes clear that testimony will not be completed by the end of the allocated time period. Other judges, however, will absolutely not continue the hearing and will instead close the case and issue their decision regardless of how incomplete the evidence. Attorneys should consult with NIJC about the practices of individual judges.

Sometimes the judge's questions are not inappropriate or offensive, but may simply be confusing. Questions previously asked may elicit inconsistent, incoherent, or non-responsive answers. One remedy may be to respectfully suggest to the judge a different manner of wording the question or to simply suggest to the judge that the client is confused or may not have understood the translation of the question. Another remedy may be to request an opportunity to conduct a brief additional redirect after the judge has completed his questioning, in order to clarify any confusion or explain any inconsistencies or issues affecting the judge's estimate of the client's credibility.

#### **i. Closing Statements**

Most judges permit closing statements, though they will rely on pre-hearing briefs and their notes of the client's testimony. Where testimony in the hearing has raised specific questions of law or fact, the pro bono attorney may wish to ask for the opportunity to address them very briefly on the record. In many cases, the closing statement may take on the format of an oral argument, with the judge engaging the client's attorney and the trial attorney on the legal issues in the case.

### **6. THE DECISION OF THE IMMIGRATION JUDGE**

Typically, the judge will issue an oral decision immediately at the close of the case. The judge may simply discuss what the decision would be and on what grounds the court has decided, or the judge may recess the hearing for half an hour and return with a decision that will be read into the record. When the immigration judge issues a decision, whether favorable or unfavorable, the client receives only a minute order form filled out and signed by the judge.

Other times, the immigration judge may continue the case for a period of time in order to produce a written decision. However, this is less common.

When the judge is orally rendering the decision, the attorney should pay careful attention and make note of the bases for the decision, and any areas where the judge misstates, misinterprets, or overlooks evidence or matters of law. If the client loses, the pro bono attorney must fill out a Notice to Appeal, stating specific grounds justifying the appeal, not just a general statement of boilerplate language, but the court will not produce a transcript of the hearing until after the Notice of Appeal is due, prior to the briefing deadline.

After the judge issues an oral decision, each side will be asked whether they choose to reserve appeal. If the client wins, the trial attorney will often reserve appeal- and on some occasions, they actually do file a Notice of Appeal. If the client loses, the pro bono attorney should reserve appeal.

**After the hearing on the merits, please notify NIJC of the outcome as soon as possible to ensure that the client is able to access certain asylee benefits and to discuss next steps.** If the client receives a final grant of asylum, NIJC asks that the pro bono attorney email a copy of the client's affidavit, I-589 asylum application, pre-hearing brief or memorandum, and the asylum office or immigration judge's decision to Asylum Project Coordinator Lili Henkel at [lhenkel@heartlandalliance.org](mailto:lhenkel@heartlandalliance.org) for NIJC's records.



## The Appeal to The BIA

An unsuccessful asylum applicant may appeal to the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA), an administrative body in Falls Church, Virginia. NIJC's policy is that if the judge has denied asylum and a reasonable and non-frivolous ground for appeal exists, the pro bono attorney should pursue it.

The appeal requires a simple Notice of Appeal, articulating the grounds for appeal, that must be filed within 30 days of an oral decision or mailing of a written decision, and a \$110 filing fee. The Notice of Appeal – and all correspondence to the BIA – must include a certificate of service stating that service was made on the Office of the Chief Counsel.<sup>27</sup>

Several months (or sometimes longer) after the filing of the Notice of Appeal, the BIA will send a transcript and briefing schedule to both parties. The pro bono attorney will file a written brief after receiving the transcript. The brief is normally due within 21 days of receipt of the transcript. An extension of up to 21 days may be requested prior to the expiration of this briefing deadline, but is not always granted.

When drafting a BIA appeal brief, pro bono attorneys should be aware that the BIA frequently rubber-stamps the judge's decision denying asylum and it is likely that the client will have to pursue a petition for review before the Court of Appeals. As a result, the BIA appeal brief must fully exhaust all appealable issues and **it is extremely important that all BIA appeal briefs be reviewed by NIJC prior to filing**. Pro bono attorneys should provide NIJC with a draft of the brief **at least seven business days** before they intend to file. NIJC also asks that attorneys provide a copy of the final brief that they filed. Once the appeal to the BIA is decided, please notify and provide NIJC with a copy of the opinion immediately so that next steps can be determined.

The BIA has limited fact-finding ability on appeal, which heightens the need for immigration judges to include in their decisions clear and complete findings of fact that are supported by the record and comply with controlling law. *Matter of S-H-*, 23 I&N Dec. 462 (BIA 2002); *Matter of Villanova-Gonzalez*, 13 I&N Dec. 399 (BIA 1969) and *Matter of Becerra-Miranda*, 12 I&N Dec. 358 (BIA 1967), superseded by *Matter of S-H-*.

## Federal Court Review

If the BIA decides against the client, she may be entitled to file a petition for review before the Court of Appeals in the circuit in which the case was originally tried, i.e. the Seventh Circuit for cases tried before the Chicago Immigration Court. If the BIA denies the client's appeal, NIJC will work with the pro bono attorneys to determine if filing a petition for review is a viable option for the client. Petitions for review of BIA decisions must be filed within 30 days of the issuance of the BIA decision. However, there may be earlier deadlines related to the client's removability that could necessitate filing

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<sup>27</sup> If an applicant was denied asylum, but granted voluntary departure, and files an appeal of the asylum denial, she must provide the BIA proof that she has posted her voluntary departure bond within 30 days of filing her notice of appeal. If the applicant does not provide the BIA with timely proof that she posted bond, the BIA will not reinstate her voluntary departure period in its final order. 8 C.F.R. § 1240.26(c)(3)(ii).

the petition prior to the 30-day deadline. Moreover, in some cases, the pro bono attorneys may need to request a stay of the client's removal if DHS is attempting to remove the client. Given the numerous issues that can arise following the BIA's denial of a client's appeal, it is crucial that pro bono attorneys work closely with NIJC at this stage.

# ADVISING THE CLIENT AFTER ASYLUM IS GRANTED

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When asylum is granted, it means that the asylee can live and work legally in the United States and will eventually have the opportunity to apply for lawful permanent resident (LPR) status and citizenship. However, DHS can, at any time, reopen the case and attempt to terminate asylum and seek the removal of the asylee if it is determined that any one of a number of conditions are met: that country conditions have fundamentally changed such that the asylee no longer need fear persecution; that the asylee participated in the persecution of others; that the asylee committed a particularly serious crime and constitutes a danger to the community; that the asylee committed a serious non-political crime outside of the United States; that the asylee poses a threat to the security of the United States; that the asylee was firmly resettled outside the United States prior to her arrival; that the asylee may be removed pursuant to a bi-lateral agreement to a safe third country that will provide protections; that the asylee has voluntarily returned to her home country; or, that the asylee has acquired a new nationality.<sup>28</sup>

Practically speaking, attempts to revoke asylum are rare without new evidence that the asylee has committed a serious crime in the United States or fraudulently obtained asylum. It is important to note, however, that asylum *is not* a permanent, guaranteed status for life in the United States. For that reason, it is essential to encourage all asylees to begin the process of applying for lawful permanent residence one year from the date on which they were granted asylum.<sup>29</sup> Please see below for more information.

## Derivative Asylum for Spouse and Children

In affirmative cases, “immediate family members” present in the United States and “included” in the original asylum application automatically receive asylum when the asylum office grants asylum to the principal applicant. In defensive cases, “immediate family members” present in the United States who are in removal proceedings with the principal applicant (*i.e.*, have received an NTA) and are “included” in the application automatically receive asylum when the judge grants asylum to the principal applicant. “Immediate family members” include the asylee's legal spouse and unmarried children who were under 21 years of age at the time the asylum application was filed. If the client and her spouse have a common-law marriage, which is very common in many countries, they may need to legally marry in the United States prior to the date on which the asylum office or judge adjudicates the client’s claim. Only those formal relationships that exist on the date on which asylum is granted entitle spouses and children to derivative benefits.

If immediate family members are present in the United States, but were not “included” in the asylum application (or in a defensive case, if they were not in removal proceedings), an asylee can file an I-730 Refugee/Asylee Relative Petition with USCIS to obtain asylee derivative status for the family member.

If the client’s immediate family members are outside the United States, the client must also file an I-730 form with USCIS. The time this process takes depends on the country of origin of the family members and other issues, such as the family’s ability to obtain identity and travel documents. The spouse

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<sup>28</sup> 8 C.F.R. §208.24

<sup>29</sup> See INA §209 and 8 C.F.R. §§209.1; 209.2.

and/or children will be admitted into the United States as asylees with benefits and rights similar to those of the principal asylee, often including the right to apply for legal permanent residence and eventually, citizenship.

The asylee must petition for immediate relatives within a two-year period after being granted asylum. Once the two-year period has passed, asylees can no longer petition for their immediate family members. As a procedural matter, NIJC asks that pro bono attorneys refer clients back to NIJC for representation in the filing of I-730 petitions. This ensures that NIJC is able to screen clients for this benefit since there are frequently legal complications that make these applications challenging. For example, USCIS may require DNA testing for the asylee petitioner and her children or discover unexpected issues related to the family that can make them ineligible for asylee derivative status.

NIJC currently serves clients seeking to file I-730 petitions in-house and through I-730 clinics that NIJC conducts with partner law firms. NIJC's capacity to provide technical support on I-730 cases is limited to these clinics. Pro bono attorneys should be aware that NIJC does not maintain retainer agreements with former asylum clients once asylum has been granted. As a result, NIJC is unable to assist pro bono attorneys who choose to file I-730 petitions themselves.

## **Eligibility for Employment and a Social Security Number**

Asylees are automatically eligible to work in the United States and DO NOT need an Employment Authorization Document (EAD). An asylee is eligible for an *unrestricted* social security card that, along with proof of identity, is sufficient to establish that she is eligible to work in the United States. An asylee can obtain an unrestricted social security card by bringing proof of the asylum grant to the Social Security Administration (SSA), along with proof of identity, and apply for the card.

Individuals who obtained asylum through the asylum office can show the original asylum office decision and/or their new I-94 (which is issued with the asylum office decision) as proof of their asylum status. For individuals who obtain asylum in court, the SSA typically will not accept the court order as proof of their asylum status. These asylees will need to first obtain a new I-94 card from USCIS that lists their status as asylees or present a new asylee EAD card. Please see NIJC's [Post-Win FAQ](#) for more information about requesting an asylee I-94 card.

Asylees can only obtain the unrestricted social security card following a final grant of asylum, so if the judge grants asylum, but DHS reserves appeal, the client is not yet eligible for an unrestricted social security card. Asylees with final grants should wait approximately ten days to two weeks following the grant to request an unrestricted card, and they will receive the cards in the mail roughly two weeks after they have applied.

While no asylee is required to possess an EAD, many asylees do not possess sufficient proof of identity to easily obtain identity documents, including state IDs or Driver's Licenses. Accordingly, many asylees who do not possess a valid passport or other government-issued picture/signature identity card *choose* to apply for an EAD.<sup>30</sup> An EAD is offered free of charge to asylees upon initial application, but subject to a fee for subsequent renewal applications (although no renewals should be necessary).

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<sup>30</sup> Due to long processing delays at USCIS, it may be quicker to obtain an asylee EAD than an asylee I-94 card due to backlogs at the USCIS offices that issue the I-94 cards. Attorneys with clients who were granted asylum in court and are unsure whether to pursue an I-94 card or EAD should contact their NIJC point-of-contact.

Clients who obtain asylum from the asylum office will automatically receive an EAD in the mail following the grant of asylum. Clients who obtain asylum through an immigration judge and wish to have an EAD will need to file an I-765 application to obtain the EAD.

Pro bono attorneys should inform their clients that if they obtain an EAD after receiving asylum, the clients should not use the EAD as a substitute for an unrestricted social security card and a state-issued ID card. The latter two documents should be used, as soon as they are available, as proof of eligibility to accept employment in the United States when completing an I-9 form with a potential employer.

Some potential employers illegally require that asylees present an EAD as proof of employment eligibility. Such a demand is document abuse, and should be reported to the Office of Special Counsel for Immigration-Related Unfair Employment Practices.

## Public Benefits

Asylees are entitled to certain public benefits. However, most of these programs themselves are time-limited, and individuals may only be able to receive benefits for periods of three months to a year, depending on the programs. Other programs may be available continuously.

Once an NIJC client receives a final grant of asylum, NIJC will refer clients who reside in the Chicago metropolitan area to the local refugee resettlement agency who will assist the client with the benefits process. Clients residing outside of Chicago will need to locate the asylee benefits agency closest to their residence and can contact NIJC for assistance. In addition to administering benefits programs and providing general public benefits counseling, these agencies often provide English classes, employment training and placement programs, mental health programs, youth and elderly services, and referrals to other social service agencies as necessary.

To be eligible for benefits, the client must have an intake interview with the resettlement agency **within 30 days** of the asylum grant, so **it is crucial that attorneys notify NIJC as soon as their clients receive asylum**. Clients with cases on appeal are not eligible for benefits until the appeal is complete or a final approval is granted.

## Taxes

Asylees are required to report all income earned in the United States to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and to pay taxes on that income. Asylees must therefore submit yearly income tax reports to the IRS.

## Right To Travel

An asylee is eligible to travel outside the United States. However, before leaving the United States, asylees **must** obtain advance permission to re-enter the country. An asylee can receive such authorization by applying for a Refugee Travel Document. Asylees who wish to apply for a Refugee Travel Document should make an appointment with NIJC's Immigrant Legal Defense Project. They should call (312) 660-1370 for assistance.

Even with a Refugee Travel Document, it is essential that an asylee not return to her home country until she has become a lawful permanent resident of the U.S. and preferably, until she is a U.S. citizen. If the asylee does return to her home country, DHS could refuse to allow her to reenter the United States on the grounds that, implicitly, she no longer fears persecution. Moreover, other factors could make an asylee ineligible to reenter the United States even with a Refugee Travel Document.<sup>31</sup> Asylees should always consult with an attorney before traveling outside of the United States. NIJC discourages foreign travel of any kind until asylees become permanent residents.

## **Lawful Permanent Residence Status**

One year from the date of the asylum grant, the asylee is eligible to submit an application for adjustment of status to become a lawful permanent resident (LPR) (sometimes referred to as “green card status”). It typically takes approximately one year for asylees to gain LPR status after they file their applications.

The grant of LPR status is discretionary and USCIS can deny adjustment of status for asylees for a number of reasons, particularly if USCIS believes that the asylee no longer meets the definition of a “refugee.” This could occur in a case where conditions in the asylee's home country have improved to such an extent that she no longer fears persecution. In practice, this provision is rarely invoked. In the past for most asylees, adjustment was virtually automatic, but in recent years, USCIS has been scrutinizing asylee adjustment applications more closely.

Spouses and children who obtained derivative asylee status are also eligible for adjustment of status to lawful permanent residence as long as they can demonstrate that the relationship through which they received derivative status continues through such time as their application for adjustment is granted. Unfortunately, this means that derivative asylees do not always have the right to lawful permanent residency. If the relationship has been severed, by, for instance, a divorce, the spouse who has derivative status is not eligible for adjustment of status.

As with I-730 petitions, NIJC asks that pro bono attorneys refer clients back to NIJC prior to the filing of asylee adjustment applications and not file them on their own. This ensures that NIJC is able to screen clients to make sure that they are eligible to adjust their status.

Similarly, as with I-730 petitions, NIJC serves asylees seeking to adjust their status in-house and through a clinic that NIJC conducts with a partner law firm. NIJC's capacity to provide technical support on asylee adjustment cases is limited to these clinics. Pro bono attorneys should be aware that NIJC does not maintain retainer agreements with former asylum clients once asylum has been granted. As a result, NIJC is unable to assist pro bono attorneys who choose to file asylee adjustment applications themselves.

## **Citizenship**

Five years after an asylee receives lawful permanent residence (“green card” status), she may apply to become a U.S. citizen (the “naturalization process.”). This status will afford the full protections under the law, and permanent, virtually irrevocable status in the United States. NIJC strongly

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<sup>31</sup> An asylee who accrued one year or more of unlawful presence before applying for asylum could trigger a 10-year bar to reentry if she leaves the United States before obtaining permanent residency.

recommends that individuals seek legal representation when applying to become a U.S. citizen, in part because USCIS has been heavily scrutinizing the immigration histories of naturalization applicants. Individuals who would like assistance with the naturalization process can make a consultation appointment with NIJC.

# ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

\* \* \*

## Obtaining Employment Authorization<sup>32</sup>

Although employment authorization is not an asylum applicant's automatic right, an asylum applicant may be authorized to work. *See* INA §208(d)(2). The employment authorization document (EAD) can be used not just for employment purposes, but also as a form of government identification and to obtain a restricted social security number. As a result, a parent may want to apply for employment authorization for a young child, even if the child cannot work.

An asylum applicant's ability to obtain employment authorization depends upon her "asylum clock" and whether she has accrued 150 days since she filed her asylum application with USCIS or with the immigration court. *See* 8 C.F.R. § 208.7(a)(1). [Applicant-caused delays](#) before the 150-day mark, such as missing a biometrics appointment or an interview, filing a change of venue, or asking the immigration court for a continuance, could pause the asylum "clock," and it will not restart until the delay is resolved (i.e. the biometrics were taken, the client attended the interview, or the client attended her next hearing in immigration court). The EAD can then be issued at 180 days. There is no filing fee for an initial EAD, and no biometrics filing fee.

### **Practice Tips:**

#### **1. WHAT TO FILE**

##### **a. Application**

To apply for work authorization, pro bono attorneys will need to file an Application for Employment Authorization (Form I-765). A link to the I-765 form and instructions can be found [here](#). Note that each family member living in the United States who is included on the applicant's asylum application may also submit an I-765. This means that even if the client's child is not of legal age to work, an application may be filed on that child's behalf so that she may get a social security number for future income tax reporting or for other purposes, such as school admission.

##### **b. Proof of Pending Asylum Application**

Along with the form I-765, the applicant must submit proof that the asylum application has been filed with USCIS (e.g., a USCIS receipt notice), that it has been filed with the immigration court (a file-stamped copy of the I-589 and hearing notice showing the case remains pending), or that it is pending before the BIA (a file-stamped copy of the I-589 and a BIA receipt of timely appeal).

##### **c. Fee or Fee Waiver**

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<sup>32</sup> As a reminder, asylees need not obtain employment authorization. Persons granted asylum will be able to obtain an unrestricted social security number, which they can present as proof of status to work.



There is no fee for an initial EAD for asylum applicants, and there is no biometrics filing fee.

**d. Photos**

The applicant must also submit two, color passport-style photographs. The applicant's name and "A" number should be lightly printed on the back of both photos in pencil. In addition, the photographs should be inserted into a sealed envelope and paper-clipped to the I-765 application.

**e. Identity Documents**

USCIS requires that EAD applicants submit an identity document with their application, but many asylum seekers do not have access to identity documents. Please contact your NIJC point-of-contact for recommendations if your client does not have access to an identity document.

**2. RENEWALS**

Asylum-based EADs are renewable while the asylum application is being decided, including while the case is pending before the BIA. 8 C.F.R. § 208.7(b). Generally, an application to renew employment authorization cannot be filed more than 180 days before the prior authorization is set to expire. The cost of a renewal application for an asylum applicant is \$410. If your client is unable to pay this fee, fee waivers are available if the client meets certain requirements. More information about fee waivers can be found [here](#).

Given the delays in approving employment authorization renewal applications, NIJC strongly recommends that attorneys file the renewal application at the 180-day point prior to expiration to avoid any gaps in employment authorization, which can result in loss of employment and other financial hardships for clients. At the very least, the renewal application must be filed prior to the expiration of the current card in order to ensure that the client receives the benefit of the automatic 540-day extension period while the renewal application is adjudicated.<sup>33</sup>

**3. TIMELINE FOR ADJUDICATION**

As a result of the various lawsuits regarding the EAD rules, asylum applicants are entitled to a 30-day adjudication of their initial asylum application-based employment authorization application. Please [click here](#) for more information on how to ensure USCIS adjudicates EAD applications within 30 days for initial EAD applicants.

For renewal applicants, processing times have been extremely long. On average, it is taking about a year for an applicant to get a new employment authorization card issued. The applicant will first receive a Notice of Receipt of the I-765 application. Once her I-765 application is approved, then the applicant will receive a Notice of Approval. As long as the renewal application was filed prior to the expiration of the current card, the client will be eligible for an automatic 540-day extension of her current EAD card while the renewal application is being adjudicated.

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<sup>33</sup> The 540-day extension policy can be found on USCIS's website at <https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/information-for-employers-and-employees/automatic-employment-authorization-document-ead-extension>.

## Freedom of Information Act Requests

NIJC recommends that all pro bono attorneys file a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request with USCIS to obtain copies of the client's file because DHS may have documents that the client does not have or that the client has forgotten. For example, if DHS stopped the client at the border, DHS may have documents regarding statements the client made at that time, which contradict statements she makes during the hearing. The client may also have previously filed for some other immigration benefit, but neglected to tell her attorney or NIJC. Without the FOIA request, pro bono attorneys will not know about these documents until the asylum officer or trial attorney uses them for impeachment purposes during the asylum interview or merits hearing.

Clients in immigration court removal proceedings are eligible for expedited "Track Three" processing of the FOIA request. It generally takes DHS a few months to respond to a Track Three FOIA request. Depending on the time frame of the case, pro bono attorneys may need to file the FOIA request as soon as they accept the case. It can take DHS one year or more to respond to Track One/Two (not in removal proceedings) FOIA requests.

Clients who are not in removal proceedings are not eligible for expediting processing and as a result, it typically takes DHS longer to respond to the FOIA request. However, because it can often take one or more years to receive an asylum office interview or decision, filing a FOIA request is still recommended.

For more information about filing a USCIS FOIA and to obtain the G-639, Freedom of Information Act Request form, please see <https://www.uscis.gov/records/request-records-through-the-freedom-of-information-act-or-privacy-act>.

## ORR File Requests

Unaccompanied immigrant children who were previously detained in an Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) shelter will have accumulated a file of documents related to their time in ORR custody, including counselor and caseworker notes, medical records, and other personal information. Sometimes, these records can support a child's asylum claim by corroborating the child's description of past trauma. In other cases, a child may have been reluctant to reveal information about her background to strangers so soon after crossing the U.S. border and her ORR file may therefore contain information that is inconsistent with her asylum claim. For all these reasons, NIJC strongly recommends that attorneys representing unaccompanied children file a request for the client's ORR file shortly after representation begins. It often takes several months for ORR to provide the client's file after the request is made. Please [click here](#) for instructions on requesting a client's ORR file.

## Selective Service Registration

All males in the United States between 18 and 26 years of age are required to register for the draft. Asylees and asylum seekers are not exempt. Failure to register may have implications for the client when he applies to become a U.S. citizen. Information about the Selective Service can be found at: <http://www.sss.gov>.

# CONTACT INFORMATION

\* \* \*

For Non-Detained Asylum Cases:

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Email: [agandhi@heartlandalliance.org](mailto:agandhi@heartlandalliance.org)

The National Immigrant Justice Center is located at 224 S. Michigan Avenue, Ste. 600, Chicago, IL 60604.

# IMPORTANT PHONE NUMBERS AND ADDRESSES

## **Chicago Office of Asylum**

Department of Homeland Security  
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services  
181 W. Madison Street, Suite 3000  
Chicago IL 60602  
Phone: 312-849-5200  
Fax: 312-849-5201

## **ICE Office of Chief Counsel**

525 W. Van Buren Street, Ste. 701  
Chicago, IL 60607  
Phone: 312-542-8200  
eService portal registration:  
<https://eserviceregistration.ice.gov/>  
eService portal: <https://eservice.ice.gov>

## **Chicago Non-Detained Immigration Court**

525 W. Van Buren St, Ste. 500  
Chicago, IL 60607  
Phone: 312-697-5800

## **Chicago Detained Immigration Court**

536 Clark Street, Suite 340  
Chicago, IL 60605  
Phone: 312-294-8400

## Immigration Judges

Judge Samuel B. Cole (detained)  
Judge Elizabeth Crites  
Judge Brendan Curran  
Judge Craig Defoe  
Judge Eliza Klein  
Judge Michael P. Klosowsky  
Judge Patrick M. McKenna  
Judge Samia Naseem  
Judge Sebastian T. Patti  
Assistant Chief Immigration Judge Jennifer I. Peyton  
Judge Robin Rosche  
Judge Kaarina Salovaara  
Judge Eva S. Saltzman  
Judge Marc B. Stahl  
Judge Michelle M. Venci  
Judge Gina Reynolds  
Judge Ana M. Mencini

## **Nebraska Service Center**

U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services  
Nebraska Service Center  
P.O. Box (Insert Correct Box Number)  
Lincoln, NE (Insert Correct Zip Code)

## Overnight/Courier Mail:

U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services  
Nebraska Service Center  
850 S Street  
P.O. Box (Insert Correct P.O. Box Number)  
Lincoln, NE xxxxx

Box Number for Asylum: 87589  
Zip Code for Asylum: 68501-7589

## **Board of Immigration Appeals**

Office of the Chief Clerk  
5107 Leesburg Pike, Suite 2000  
Falls Church, VA 20530-0001  
Phone: 703-605-1007

## **Important Websites**

- Online applications: [www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov)
- Executive Office for Immigration Review: [www.usdoj.gov/eoir](http://www.usdoj.gov/eoir)
- NIJC: [www.immigrantjustice.org](http://www.immigrantjustice.org)

## **EOIR Automated Information Line:**

**1-800-898-7180**

<https://portal.eoir.justice.gov/InfoSystem>

(For information regarding  
the client's hearing)

# LEGAL RESOURCE MATERIALS

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## Sources For Case Preparation

EOIR Virtual Law Library: <http://www.justice.gov/eoir/vll/libindex.html>

Immigration Court Practice Manual: [Immigration Court Practice Manual | EOIR | Department of Justice](#)

UNHCR [Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status](#) (1992), available at [UNHCR - Handbook and Guidelines on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, February 2019 | European Database of Asylum Law \(asylumlawdatabase.eu\)](#)

UNHCR [Guidelines on International Protection](#):

- [Gender-Related Persecution](#)
- [Religious-Based Refugee Claims](#)
- [Internal Flight or Relocation Alternative](#)
- [Gangs](#)
- [El Salvador](#)
- [Honduras](#)
- [Guatemala](#)

## Sources For Documentation

Amnesty International: <http://www.amnesty.org/>

Amnesty International USA: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/>

Human Rights Watch, [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: [www.unhcr.org/refworld](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld)

United States Department of State: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/>

Resources for Central American/Mexican Asylum Claims:

- [Case assistance](#) from the Center for Gender and Refugee Studies at UC Hastings
- Temple University [Annotated Table of Contents Project](#) for country condition documents from Central America

Please see NIJC's website [www.immigrantjustice.org](http://www.immigrantjustice.org)  
for additional asylum-related materials and immigration legal updates

# LINKS TO ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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Please [click here](#) to access NIJC's attorney resources page:

## **Sample Forms and Letters**

### Asylum Application

[Asylum Filing Checklist](#)

[Instructions and Application for Asylum and Withholding of Removal \(I-589\)](#)

[Sample I-589 application](#)

### Notices of Appearance as Attorney

[For court \(EOIR-28\)](#)

[For DHS/ICE/USCIS \(G-28\)](#)

### [Request to Review Record of Proceeding or Hearing Tape](#)

\*You can also request specific court documents by following the procedures here: [Request an ROP by Email \(Immigration Courts\) \(justice.gov\)](#)

### Fingerprint Request Forms

[Fingerprint Appointment Instructions for Asylum Applications](#)

### Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Request (<http://www.uscis.gov>)

[FOIA Request Form G-639](#)

### [Office of Refugee Resettlement Authorization for Release of Records for UICs](#)

### Application for Employment Authorization (<http://www.uscis.gov>)

[Sample Cover Letter for Initial EAD application](#)

[Sample Cover Letter for Renewal application](#)

[Form I-765 and Instructions](#)

### Change of Address Forms

[For DHS: \(AR-11\)](#)

[For court and the BIA: \(EOIR-33\)](#)

### [Sample Notice to Appear](#)

### [Sample Certificates of Translation for Foreign Language Affidavits and Documents](#)

### [Sample Certificate of Service](#)

## **Resources for Case Preparation**

[Tips: Working with an Interpreter](#)

Frequently Asked Questions:

- [Post-win Information](#)

[EOIR Guidelines for Facilitating \*Pro Bono\* Legal Services](#)

# GLOSSARY OF IMMIGRATION TERMS

\* \* \*

## A

- “A” Number:** An eight digit number (or nine digits, if the first number is a zero) beginning with the letter "A" that the DHS gives to some non-citizens. (Please note that EOIR now requires all A Numbers to be submitted as nine digit numbers. If the client’s A Number only has eight digits, add a “0” to the beginning of the number.)
- Adjustment of Status:** A process by which a non-citizen in the United States becomes a lawful permanent resident without having to leave the U.S.
- Admission:** The decision of the DHS to allow a non-citizen at the United States border or international airport or seaport to enter the United States.
- Admissible:** A non-citizen who may enter the U.S. because he/she is not among the classes of aliens who are ineligible for admission or has a waiver of inadmissibility.
- Affidavit of Support:** A form (I-864) filed by a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident for a non-citizen seeking lawful permanent residence.
- Aggravated Felon:** One convicted of numerous crimes set forth at INA § 101(a)(43). An aggravated felony includes many crimes, but the most common are: (1) drug trafficking--any crime involving distribution, importation or sale of drugs, no matter the amount or the sentence; (2) the crime of theft, robbery or burglary with one year sentence whether imposed or suspended; and (3) the crime of violence with a one year sentence whether imposed or suspended.
- Alien:** A person who is not a citizen or national of the United States.
- Alien Registration Receipt Card:** The technical name for a "green card," which identifies an immigrant as having permanent resident status.
- Aliens Previously Removed:** Ground of inadmissibility, for persons previously removed for anywhere from five years to twenty years depending on prior circumstances.
- Aliens Unlawfully Present:** Ground of inadmissibility for three years for an individual unlawfully present in the U.S. for more than 180 days but less than one year



commencing April 1, 1997 or for ten years if unlawfully present for one year or more.

**Asylee:** A person who is granted asylum in the United States.

**Asylum:** A legal status granted to a person who has suffered harm or who fears harm because of his/her race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.

## **B**

**Beneficiary:** A person who will gain legal status in the United States as a result of a visa petition approved by the DHS.

## **C**

**Cancellation of Removal:** Discretionary remedy for an LPR who has been a permanent resident for at least five years and has resided continuously in the United States for at least seven years after having been admitted in any status and has not been convicted of an aggravated felony, or anyone physically present in the United States for a continuous period of not less than ten years, who has been a person of good moral character during such period, has not been convicted of certain offenses and who establishes that removal would result in “exceptional and extremely unusual hardship” to the U.S. citizen or LPR spouse, parent, or child.

**Child:** The term "child" means an unmarried person under twenty-one years of age who is: (1) a legitimated child; (2) a stepchild; (3) a child legitimated under the law of the child's residence or domicile, or under the law of the father's residence or domicile; (4) an illegitimate child; (5) a child adopted while under the age of sixteen; and (6) a child who is an orphan. There is a significant amount of case law interpreting these categories.

**Citizen (USC):** Any person born in the fifty United States, Guam, Puerto Rico, or the U.S. Virgin Islands; or a person who has naturalized to become a U.S. citizen. Some people born abroad are also citizens if their parents were citizens.

**Conditional Permanent Resident Status:** A person who received lawful permanent residency based on a marriage to a U.S. citizen, which was less than two years old at the time. Conditional residents must file a second petition with the U.S. within two years of receiving their conditional resident status in order to retain their U.S. residency.

**Consular Processing:** The process by which a person outside the United States obtains an immigrant visa at a U.S. consulate in order to travel to the U.S. and enter as a lawful permanent resident.

**Conviction:** Formal judgment of guilt entered by a court or, if adjudication of guilt was withheld, if a judge or jury has found the person guilty or the person has entered a plea of guilty or *nolo contendere* and has admitted sufficient facts to warrant a finding of guilt and the judge has ordered some form of punishment, penalty or restraint.

**Credible Fear Interview:** An interview that takes place if an alien who arrives in the United States with false documents or no documents, and is therefore subject to expedited removal, expresses a fear of persecution or a desire for asylum. The purpose of the interview is to determine if the alien can show that there is a significant possibility that he/she can satisfy the qualifications for asylum.

## D

**Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA):** A form of temporary relief from deportation announced by the Obama Administration in July 2012 for certain young immigrants who were brought to the United States as children and educated here.

**Department of Homeland Security (DHS):** The federal department charged, in part, with implementing and enforcing immigration law and policy.

**Deportation:** The ejection of a non-citizen from the United States. Prior to the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), non-citizens were ejected from the United States through deportation proceedings. Now known as removal proceedings.

**Detention:** Asylum seekers who enter the U.S. without documentation may be detained at a DHS detention facility until they pass a credible fear interview or until the completion of their asylum hearing.

## E

**Entry:** Being physically present in the U.S. after inspection by the DHS or after entering without inspection.

**Entry Without Inspection (EWI):** Entering the United States without being inspected by the DHS, such as a person who runs across the border between the U.S. and Mexico or Canada. This is a violation of the immigration laws.

**Employment Authorization Document (EAD):**

The I-688 card that the DHS issues to a person granted permission to work in the U.S. The EAD is a plastic, wallet-sized card.

**Executive Office for**

**Immigration Review (EOIR):** The immigration court, the Board of Immigration Appeals, and one other agency within the Department of Justice that decides immigration cases.

**Expedited Removal:**

An abbreviated removal procedure applied to aliens who arrive in the United States with false documents or no documents.

**I**

**I-94 Card:**

A small white paper card issued by the DHS to most non-citizens who do not have green cards upon entry to the U.S. It is usually stapled to a page of the non-citizen's passport. The DHS may also issue I-94 cards in other circumstances. The I-94 card usually states the date by which the non-citizen's authorized stay in the United States expires.

**Illegal Alien:**

See "Undocumented".

**Immigration and**

**Customs Enforcement (ICE):** The agency within the Department of Homeland Security responsible for overseeing detention and release of immigrants and the investigation of immigration-related administrative and criminal violations.

**Immediate Relative:**

The spouse, parent, or unmarried child under 21 of a U.S. citizen. Generally speaking, the immigration laws treat immediate relatives better than other relatives of citizens or legal permanent residents.

**Immigrant:**

A person who has the intention to reside permanently in the United States; usually a lawful permanent resident.

**Immigrant Visa:**

A document required by the INA and required and properly issued by a consular office outside of the United States to an eligible immigrant under the provisions of the INA. An immigrant visa has six months validity.

**Immigration and Nationality Act (INA):**

The immigration law that Congress originally enacted in 1952 and has modified repeatedly.

**Immigration and**

**Naturalization Service (INS):** Former branch of the United States Department of Justice charged with enforcing the immigration laws. On March 1, 2003, the INS ceased to exist. Responsibility for immigration policy and immigration functions is now shared between the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security.

**Immigration Judge:** Presides over removal proceedings.

**Inspection:** The DHS process of inspecting a person's travel documents at the U.S. border or international airport or seaport.

## L

**Lawful Permanent Resident (LPR):** A person who has received a "green card" and whom the DHS has decided may live permanently in the U.S. LPRs eventually may become citizens, but if they do not, they could be deported from the U.S. for certain activities, such as drug convictions and certain other crimes.

## N

**Native:** A person born in a specific country.

**National:** A person owing permanent allegiance to a particular country.

**Naturalization:** The process by which an LPR becomes a United States citizen. A person must ordinarily have been an LPR for five years before applying for naturalization. A person who became an LPR through marriage to a U.S. citizen and is still married to that person in most cases may apply for naturalization after three years as an LPR.

**Non-citizen:** Any person who is not a citizen of the U.S., whether legal or undocumented. Referred to in the INA as an "alien."

**Nonimmigrant:** A person who plans to be in the U.S. only temporarily, such as a person with a tourist or student visa. A nonimmigrant will ordinarily have a visa stamp in his/her passport, and an I-94 card, which states how long the person can stay in the U.S.

**Nonimmigrant Visa:** A document issued by a consular officer signifying that the officer believes that the alien is eligible to apply for admission to the US for specific limited purposes and does not intend to remain permanently in the US. Nonimmigrant visas are temporary.

**Notice to Appear (NTA):** Document issued to commence removal proceedings, effective April 1, 1997.

## O

**Overstay:** To fail to leave the U.S. by the time permitted by the DHS on the nonimmigrant visa (as ordinarily indicated on the I-94 card), or to fail to arrange other legal status by that time.

## P

**Parole:** To permit a person to come into the United States who may not actually be eligible to enter, often granted for humanitarian reasons, or to release a person from DHS detention. A person paroled in is known as a "parolee."

**Petitioner:** A U.S. citizen or LPR who files a visa petition with the DHS so that his/her family member may immigrate.

**Priority Registration  
Date (PRD):**

Everyone who files an I-130 Petition For Alien Relative receives a priority registration date. Once a person's PRD becomes current, meaning that a visa is available, he/she can apply for LPR status. This may take a long time, as visa numbers often are not available for many years after the I-130 is approved.

## R

**Refugee:** A person who is granted permission to enter the U.S. legally because of harm or feared harm due to his/her race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Unlike an asylum applicant, a refugee must meet this definition while outside of the United States and enters the United States with refugee status.

**Relief:** Term used for a variety of grounds to avoid removal from the United States.

**Removal:** Proceedings to enforce departure of persons seeking admission to the US who are inadmissible or persons who have been admitted but are removable.

**Rescission:** Cancellation of prior adjustment to permanent resident status.

**Residence:** The principal and actual place of dwelling.

**Respondent:** The term used for the person in removal proceedings.

## S

**Service Centers:** Offices of the DHS that decide most visa petitions. There are four regional Service Centers for the entire U.S.: the Vermont Service Center (VSC); the Nebraska Service Center (NSC); the Texas Service Center (TSC); and the California Service Center (CSC).

**Stowaway:** One who obtains transportation on a vessel or aircraft without consent through concealment.

## T

**Temporary Protected Status (TPS):** A status allowing residence and employment authorization to the nationals of foreign states, for a period of not less than six months or more than eighteen months, when such state (or states) has been appropriately designated by the Attorney General because of extraordinary and temporary conditions in such state (or states).

**Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) of 2008:** A law that, among other things, changed the process by which “unaccompanied alien children” apply for asylum. Pursuant to the TVPRA, USCIS (the Asylum Office) has initial jurisdiction over all asylum applications filed by unaccompanied alien children, even if the child is already in immigration proceedings. The TVPRA went into effect on March 23, 2009.

## U

**Unaccompanied Alien Child (UAC):** An unaccompanied alien child means a child who (A) has no lawful immigration status in the United States; (B) has not attained 18 years of age; and (C) with respect to whom (i) there is no parent or legal guardian in the United States; or (ii) no parent or legal guardian in the United States is available to provide care and physical custody. 6 U.S.C. § 729(g)(2).

**Undocumented:** A non-citizen whose presence in the U.S. is not known to the DHS and who is residing here without legal immigration status. Undocumented persons include those who originally entered the U.S. legally for a temporary stay and overstayed or worked without DHS permission, and those who entered without inspection. Often referred to as “illegal aliens.”

## United States Citizenship

**And Immigration Services (USCIS):**

The agency within the Department of Homeland Security responsible for adjudicating all applications for immigration benefits.

**U-Visa**

A non-immigrant visa that allows non-citizen victims of crime to stay in the U.S. and obtain employment authorization. After three years in U-visa status, the non-citizen may be able to adjust status to obtain lawful permanent residency. Certain family members of the U-visa holder may also be eligible for derivative U-visa status.

**V**

**Violence Against Women Act (VAWA):**

Legislation passed by Congress in 1994, which contained certain immigration provisions. The immigration law provisions allow a spouse and children, or parents of children, who have been abused or subject to extreme cruelty by their legal permanent resident or United States citizen spouse or parent to immigrate without the assistance of the LPR or USC spouse or parent, provided that they meet certain conditions.

**Visa:**

A document (or a stamp placed in a person's passport) issued by a United States consulate abroad to a non-citizen to allow that person to enter the U.S. Visas are either nonimmigrant or immigrant visas.

**Visa Petition:**

A form (or series of forms) filed with the DHS by a petitioner, so that the DHS will determine a non-citizen's eligibility to immigrate.

**Voluntary Departure:**

Permission granted to a non-citizen to leave the U.S. voluntarily. The person must have good moral character and must leave the U.S. at his/her own expense, within a specified time. A non-citizen granted voluntary departure can reenter the U.S. legally in the future.

**W**

**Waiver:**

The excusing of a ground of inadmissibility by the DHS or the immigration court.

**Work Permit:**

There is no single document in U.S. immigration law that is a "work permit." Citizens, nationals, and lawful permanent residents are authorized to be employed in the U.S. Certain nonimmigrant visa categories include employment in the U.S. Other aliens in the U.S. may have the right to apply for an Employment Authorization Document (EAD).