



CATHOLIC LEGAL
IMMIGRATION
NETWORK, INC.

Advocacy Toolkit

Religious Workers Are Essential



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Introduction

In December 2021, CLINIC published a policy brief to bring awareness to the issues foreign-born religious workers were facing throughout their R-1 immigration processes. Over the past two and a half years, religious workers seeking visas or other immigration benefits have suffered extensive processing delays, which resulted in significant consequences for the religious workers themselves, the communities they serve, and the U.S. religious organizations that sponsor them. As we learned of those consequences through CLINIC's Religious Immigration Services clients, it was apparent that advocacy was needed on behalf of religious workers. CLINIC believes that religious workers are essential workers and should be afforded the same treatment that other employment-based immigrant categories receive.

Over the past recent months, there have been some positive updates, including a decrease in I-360 processing delays for religious workers. However, there is much more work to be done. In addition to the legal practitioners who represent foreign-born religious workers, anyone can advocate on their behalf, and we want to demonstrate exactly how you can do so. This toolkit serves as a resource which will point out current issues, updates, the policy brief and ways you can advocate for foreign-born religious workers, starting today.

Policy Brief Overview

Executive Summary

Every day, foreign-born religious workers are providing crucial services and spiritual support to communities throughout the United States. Sponsored by a U.S.-based religious organization, foreign-born religious workers come to the United States to serve in a variety of communities and provide essential services to faith-based organizations.

Although the services provided by religious workers are essential, many foreign-born religious workers have been forced to stop work or depart the United States due to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, or USCIS, processing delays and other problematic policies. The result of such significant delays and policies have been a loss of services across the U.S. for many vulnerable people typically served by religious workers.

This brief contains policy recommendations on actions the USCIS should take immediately to minimize harm to religious workers and the communities they serve in the U.S. [Read the full brief here.](#)

CLINIC's Religious Immigration Services Program

The Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., or CLINIC, through its Religious Immigration Services, or RIS, section, is one of United States' largest stakeholders and leading experts in religious immigration law, representing more than 800 foreign-born religious workers serving in more than 120 nonprofit religious organizations annually. RIS attorneys have more than 30 years of combined experience in serving U.S.-based petitioners sponsoring foreign-born religious workers, including both temporary religious workers and those seeking permanent residency in the United States.

Religious Workers Are Essential Workers

The religious worker (R-1) category is an employment-based category under U.S. immigration law, which permits people from all over the world to come to the United States to serve local communities as ministers or in religious vocations or occupations. Religious workers come to the United States at the request of U.S. nonprofit religious organizations to help meet community needs, including needs that only immigrants may be able to meet. The majority of the clients that RIS represents come to the United States to offer their religious services in the many Catholic religious organizations across the country.

Some of the services foreign-born religious workers provide are:

- Offering prayers to the sick and shut in, in local hospitals (including children's hospitals) and nursing homes;
- Visiting prisons to preside over Mass and provide spiritual support to those who are incarcerated;
- Providing Mass and administering the sacraments;
- Teaching in religious institutions;
- Providing counseling services to women and children, including those who have suffered from trauma;
- And so much more.

Read more about religious workers and the services they provide [here](#).



Religious Workers Impacted by USCIS Delays

Glenmary Home Missioners

The Glenmary Home Missioners, a Roman Catholic religious organization, has depended on religious workers to meet the spiritual and material needs of people living in rural, impoverished areas in the United States. One of the brothers in the organization worked as a nurse at the Southwest Georgia Regional Medical Center in Cuthbert, GA, on the frontlines of the pandemic. The organization dealt with extensive USCIS delays, which affected their ability to meet the needs of their community.

Diocese of Jackson

Sometime last year, three priests from the Diocese of Jackson, Mississippi, who were in the process of securing permanent residency to continue working for the Diocese, found themselves with expired employment authorization documents well past the automatic 180-day grace period given to applicants who file their applications to renew in a timely manner. Unfortunately, due to the delayed processing times for employment authorization documents, the three priests did not receive their employment authorization documents by the end of their period of authorized employment and were forced to stop working. As a result, the Diocese struggled to meet the needs of the parishioners during this time.

Airport Chaplain Forced to Stop Working

In the summer of 2021, the only Catholic priest serving as a chaplain for the Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport had to stop working due to USCIS processing delays and the expiration of his work permit. As the only Catholic chaplain at the airport who conducted pastoral care to travelers, many people relied on his services. He was also the only Spanish-speaking priest in the southern metro Atlanta area and provided crucial pastoral care to the Spanish-speaking community.



Advocacy Materials

Sample Social Media Language

Twitter

@cliniclegal's policy recommendations can help @USCIS reduce the harmful backlogs impacting religious workers and close the gap of disparate treatment between them and other employment-based categories. Read the brief here: bitly.ws/sVv8 #ReligiousWorkersAreEssential!

Immigrant #ReligiousWorkersAreEssential! Learn more about the impact that backlogs and policies at @USCIS are having on religious workers and steps that can be taken now to reduce harm! Read @cliniclegal's policy brief here: bitly.ws/sVv8

Processing times continue to impact religious workers, while other employment-based categories receive more favorable treatment. Ask @USCIS to review the differences in treatment and implement better policies for religious workers. Read @cliniclegal's policy brief here: bitly.ws/sVv8 #ReligiousWorkersAreEssential

Religious workers are still seeing delays for Form I-765 employment authorization document renewals. As @USCIS continues to work on the backlogs, urge them to also offer premium processing now for this form. Read @cliniclegal's other policy recommendations here: bitly.ws/sVv8 #ReligiousWorkersAreEssential

We ask @USCIS and the #Biden admin to reflect on just how valuable religious workers are to the US, especially during the height of #COVID19. Read new policy recommendations from @cliniclegal here: bitly.ws/sVv8. #ReligiousWorkersAreEssential!

Religious workers continue to show up to serve in U.S. communities despite all the restrictions they face daily due to problematic policies by USCIS. USCIS must do better to help decrease visa backlogs and create policies with fairness for religious workers. #ReligiousWorkersAreEssential!

Religious workers being forced to return to their homes abroad due to excessive visa processing delays is unfair. They should be allowed to remain in the U.S., like other employment-based categories, while beginning their process to adjust status. @USCIS, stop the disparate treatment. #ReligiousWorkersAreEssential!

Read CLINIC's policy brief here: bitly.ws/sVv8 to see how religious workers are unfavorably treated compared to other employment-based categories. Call on @USCIS to change their policies. #ReligiousWorkersAreEssential!

To help further decrease backlogs, @USCIS can offer premium processing and concurrent filing of the I-485 as an option for filing along with the application. #ReligiousWorkersAreEssential and should be treated as such!

Facebook

Religious workers continue to show up to serve in U.S. communities despite all the restrictions they face daily due to problematic policies by USCIS. USCIS must do better to help decrease backlogs and create fair policies for religious workers. #ReligiousWorkersAreEssential bitly.ws/sVv8

We ask @USCIS and the #Biden admin to reflect on just how valuable religious workers are to the US, especially during the height of #COVID19. Read new policy recommendations from @cliniclegal here: bitly.ws/sVv8. #ReligiousWorkersAreEssential!

Forcing religious workers to return to their homes abroad due to excessive visa processing delays is unfair. They should be allowed to remain in the U.S., like other employment-based categories, while beginning their process to adjust status. @USCIS, stop the disparate treatment. #ReligiousWorkersAreEssential!

Sample Draft Email to USCIS

Contacting USCIS directly to express your concern about the challenges facing foreign-born religious workers is one way to help. Below you will find draft language for an email message to USCIS, which you can personalize to share any of your or your community's experience with USCIS delays and the harms they cause. You can send your message to USCIS at PolicyFeedback@uscis.dhs.gov, or, if you have an internal contact within USCIS, you can direct your email message there.

To: [Official contact of USCIS]

Subject: Please Address Delays in Religious Worker Processing

Dear [Official Name/Title]:

My name is **{NAME and title if appropriate}**. I am writing to call to your attention to a recurring issue that many foreign-born religious workers in the United States are facing. Religious workers serve in various essential capacities in the United States — as clergy, health workers, teachers, etc. When they experience delays in USCIS processing, U.S. communities suffer. Key amendments to USCIS policies to improve expedited processing for religious workers are necessary.

In June 2021, USCIS reimplemented a [policy](#) which allowed foreign nationals with pending I-360s and pending I-765s to file an expedited request based on a set of criteria set by USCIS. In the policy update, USCIS stated the following: *"nonprofit organizations whose request is in furtherance of the cultural and social interests of the United States may request that a benefit be considered for expedited processing, even if premium processing is available for that benefit."*

Since that June 2021 update, the USCIS policy manual was again updated in early 2022 to clarify the expedite criteria and reflect changes that would benefit religious workers who worked for a nonprofit organization. Unfortunately, since those updates have taken place, there has not been great improvement in the number of expedite requests getting approved under the nonprofit exception.

The USCIS website indicates:

Because granting an expedite request means that USCIS would adjudicate the requestor's benefit ahead of others who filed earlier, we carefully weigh the urgency and merit of each expedite request. We may consider an expedite request if it meets one or more of the following criteria or circumstances:

- **Severe financial loss to a company or person, provided that the need for urgent action is not the result of the petitioner's or applicant's failure to:**
 - **Timely file the benefit request, or**
 - **Timely respond to any requests for additional evidence;**

...Job loss may be sufficient to establish severe financial loss for a person, depending on the individual circumstances. For example, the inability to travel for work that would result in job loss might warrant expedited treatment. The need to obtain employment authorization by itself, without evidence of other compelling factors, does not warrant expedited treatment. In addition, severe financial loss may also be established where failure to expedite would result in a loss of critical public benefits or services.

Some religious workers have been forced to stop working due to the significant delays in I-765 processing times. Even when an expedite request was filed, the expedited requests are still being consistently denied. Although there have been some improvements with I-360 processing times, the I-765 processing times are still going over the 12-month period. While the recent temporary final rule extending the 180-day automatic extension to 540 days is welcomed, the I-765 could be processed more efficiently through the addition of premium processing. It is critical that premium processing be made available for the I-765 and for religious workers. Taking this important step would help eliminate the current backlogs.

I urge you to review the current policies and improvements mentioned here and make the necessary changes to help decrease processing delays for the religious workers who so selflessly serve communities in need across the U.S.

Sincerely,

{NAME}

Sample Draft Letter to the Editor

A Letter to the Editor, or LTE, is most often written to a local or community paper in response to a recently published article, piece of news or issue of local concern. If you have witnessed the impact of USCIS processing delays or immigration challenges for religious workers in your community, submitting an LTE is a great way to get the word out in your local area about the importance of religious workers and the services they provide, and the need to come together to support them as they face immigration challenges. The language below is provided to help you draft your LTE but including a personal story will make it even more powerful. The maximum word count is usually 300 words.

From: Br./Sr./Fr./Mr./Ms. {NAME}

Address

To,

The Editor

Name of Local Newspaper

Dear Sir/Ma'am,

I am writing this letter to bring to your attention the ongoing immigration issues foreign-born religious workers have been facing over the past few years while serving in U.S. communities. Religious workers, who fall under the EB-4 category for immigration purposes, are often sponsored to come to the U.S. to provide services in various essential capacities — as clerics, pastors, teachers, health workers, chaplains, counselors and more. They often fill roles unable to be filled by U.S. citizens and serve the country's most vulnerable communities.

Over the past few years, religious workers have faced significant obstacles in getting the necessary visas and other immigration benefits to continue their work, due to certain U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services policies and processing delays. Religious workers are treated differently than other employment-based nonimmigrants and are subject to more hurdles and delays. When religious workers are forced to suspend their work or return to their home countries due to avoidable processing issues, U.S. communities suffer — children go without teachers, the sick go without spiritual care and religious services are cancelled. There are very real and heartbreaking consequences when bureaucracy and harmful policies prevent foreign-born religious workers from carrying out their work in the U.S.

Our community must raise its voice in support of religious workers, so that U.S. immigration authorities value the work of foreign-born religious workers and make the necessary policy and bureaucratic changes to allow them to continue their critical work.



Prayers

Prayer for Religious Workers

Loving God,

You have called us to serve the Body of Christ, to be your hands and feet on earth.

You teach us that we are one Body, though we have different vocations, origins, cultures and languages.

We ask your blessing on the work of vowed religious who leave their homelands to serve your people abroad.

As teachers, chaplains, health workers and providers of pastoral care, they work to spread the Gospel through service of your people in love.

We ask for legal pathways so that our brothers and sisters can continue their service.

We ask you for the courage to pursue our mission of love in the face of obstacles. We pray for patience, mercy, humility and persistence in the good work to which you have called us.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

Amen

Interfaith Prayer for Religious Workers

Loving God,

Through the gift of faith you move us to care for your people.

As teachers, clerics, ministers, and chaplains,

Healers, comforters, those who extend blessing and solace,

We thank you for calling us to serve you, God of all creation.

We ask your blessing on religious workers who leave their homelands to serve your people abroad.

We ask you today to inspire our leaders in government to see the value in the work of spiritual and pastoral care, and all work done by religious and clergy.

We ask for legal pathways so that we can continue our service of the beloved people of God.

We ask you for the courage to pursue our mission of love in the face of obstacles. We pray for patience, mercy, humility and persistence in the good work to which you have called us.

We ask you to teach us and guide us always as we seek to lead others to know your goodness.

In your name we pray,

Amen.

Helpful Resources

Site Visit Best Practice Tips

Site visits, which are conducted by USCIS fraud officers, are unannounced pre- and post-adjudication site inspections, conducted to verify information contained in certain immigration petitions. These visits are generally performed without notice in person or via email or by phone. Below are a few helpful tips that the U.S. petitioner should keep in mind during the site visit:

- Be polite and respectful.
- Assign a designated person to respond to USCIS.
- Inform reception staff and other personnel to direct the USCIS officer (via phone or in person) to the designated contact person.
- Keep the foreign national's and religious organization's documents easily accessible and readily identifiable.
- Request the name, title, and contact information for the USCIS officer conducting the site visit or ask for their business card.
- Take detailed notes of all information and documents requested by the USCIS officer.
- Consult your attorney before providing information and documents to the USCIS Officer.
- Provide the USCIS officer with the name and contact information for your attorney.
- Provide the USCIS officer with requested documents within the posted deadline.

Contact Information

USCIS

- How To Best Communicate with USCIS Right Now
 - Online Tools - <https://www.uscis.gov/contactcenter>. Here is where you can find information on:
 - Case Status
 - Processing Times
 - Case Questions
 - Virtual Assistance (Ask Emma)

USCIS Contact Center Tip Sheet ([link here](#))

USCIS Telephone Numbers

- Live Assistance
800-375-5283 (TTY 800-767-1833) Hours of operation: Mon-Fri., 8am to 8pm Eastern.
Outside the U.S.? Call 212-620-3418

Office of the Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman

- [The Office of the Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman \(CIS Ombudsman\)](#) serves as a liaison between the public and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). On any given day, they:
 - Help individuals and employers resolve issues they are having with USCIS.
 - Hold engagements to hear from the public about their experiences with USCIS.
 - Identify issues in the immigration system and make recommendations to USCIS on how to address these problems.
- The Ombudsman's office is an independent office within DHS and is not part of USCIS. This means it cannot approve or deny cases. It also cannot provide legal advice.

- How to Best Contact the CIS Ombudsman's Office:
 - **By Email (recommended):**
 - Case Assistance Inquiries: cisombudsman@hq.dhs.gov
 - For information relating to stakeholder engagements: CISOmbudsman.PublicAffairs@hq.dhs.gov
 - **By Phone:**
 - Monday thru Friday
 - 1-855-882-8100 (toll free) or
 - (202) 357-8100 (local)
 - Fax: (202) 357-0042
 - **By Mail:**
 - Office of the Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman, Department of Homeland Security, Mail Stop 0180, Washington, D.C. 20528

Other Key Updates

- On March 31, 2022, the Office of the Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman, or CIS Ombudsman, submitted a [formal recommendation](#) to USCIS regarding issuing notices to beneficiaries of Form I-129*, Petition for a Nonimmigrant Worker, who are amending, extending, or changing their status.
 - Form I-129 is required for foreign born religious workers who wish to work in the U.S. as an R-1 worker.
- On May 9, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services or USCIS announced that between May 4, 2022 to October 26, 2023, it will temporarily extend the validity of expiring or expired employment authorization documents (EADs) for certain applicants, including religious workers, while their Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization remains pending. You can read more about this news release [here](#).

If you would like to receive updates on religious immigration information, please visit this link: bitly.ws/sVv2

ABOUT THE CATHOLIC LEGAL IMMIGRATION NETWORK, INC.

CLINIC provides vital legal resources, guidance and support to a network of more than 400 legal, community-based and Catholic immigration programs across the country. CLINIC affiliates are in 49 states, with about 2,300 attorneys and accredited representatives, who in turn assist hundreds of thousands of vulnerable and low-income immigrants each year. In addition to legal and program capacity building assistance, CLINIC conducts federal-level administrative advocacy and provides state and local support to affiliates on the ground combating anti-immigrant legislation.

cliniclegal.org