



HOW TO: Find Immigration Legal Help & Avoid Notario Fraud¹

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Immigration law is complex, and it can be very difficult to win your immigration case. You should only work with someone legally allowed to practice immigration law if you want to be sure you get accurate legal advice and/or representation. Read on to learn where to look for qualified legal help and how to avoid scams.

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I. Finding Good Immigration Legal Help

First, it's important to know what someone does when they are practicing immigration law. They may:

- Tell you whether you are eligible for any immigration application;
- Tell you which form(s) to file;
- Help you complete the forms for the application, including explaining what the questions on the form are asking; or
- Represent you in immigration court or at an immigration interview.

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² Content is current as of date of writing. It is your responsibility to ensure content is up to date.

The only people who can legally do these things are licensed immigration lawyers, people called Department of Justice (DOJ) accredited representatives, and someone supervised by a lawyer or DOJ accredited representative.³ **Otherwise, they are likely not authorized to practice immigration law and you should not work with them and should look elsewhere for legal advice.**

**Finding an Immigration Lawyer or DOJ Accredited Representative
Who Works with Survivors**

If your immigration case is related to how you were the victim of sexual assault, domestic violence, stalking, trafficking, or similar crimes, it can be helpful to find an immigration lawyer or DOJ accredited representative who has experience working with survivors of these crimes.

Survivor-based or humanitarian cases can present unique challenges and also offer protections that other immigration case types do not. In addition, lawyers or DOJ representatives with experience working with survivors may know what kinds of questions to ask and be more aware of the trauma survivors have experienced. It is important that your lawyer knows how to best help you in your case.

In addition to the tips below to find an immigration lawyer or DOJ accredited representative, consider asking them specific information about their experiences working with survivors of crime, domestic violence, sexual assault, or trafficking and whether they have any taken any specialized training related to immigration applications for survivors of these crime.

If you have immigration questions or concerns, you may want a lawyer but not know where to look for one. Below are some options to help you find legal help near you.

A. Immigration Advocates Network (IAN) Legal Services Directory

The Immigration Advocates Network (IAN) has a [National Immigration Legal Services Directory](#), where you can search for free or low-cost immigration legal services. These services might only be offered if you prove your household income is below a certain level.

Private lawyers who charge higher fees are not included in the IAN Directory. Keep in mind that, just because someone is a private lawyer or charges higher fees, does not mean that they automatically are the better option for your case. There are very good

³ One example is law school clinics, which allow law students to represent clients because they work under the supervision of a licensed immigration lawyer.

lawyers in the IAN Directory and there are also very good private lawyers. You can read more about how to pick a good lawyer or DOJ accredited representative on [page 5](#).

The IAN Directory is available in Arabic, Chinese, English, Farsi, French, Haitian Creole, Hmong, Khmer, Korean, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

You can search the Directory by county (by putting your ZIP code in the input box), by detention facility (by choosing the name of the place a person is detained from the dropdown menu), or by state (by clicking on your state on the map).

The search results will list organizations that serve the area you entered into the search. For each organization, it will show:

- **Areas of legal assistance:** the immigration benefits they can help you apply for (for example, U visas, T visas, Temporary Protected Status (TPS), or asylum).⁴
- **Types of legal assistance:** what part of the application process they can help you with (for example, completing the forms, filing applications with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), representation in immigration court).
- **Location:** the organization's address.
- **Contact information:** the organization's phone number, website address, and/or email address.

When searching for immigration legal assistance, think about both the type of case you have and what type of assistance you will need. For example, if you have an asylum case in immigration court, you will want to find an organization that lists asylum as an area of legal assistance and representation before the immigration court as a type of legal assistance. However, if options are limited where you live or are detained, it may still be worth contacting an organization to see what help they can give or to ask if they know another good lawyer you can call.⁵

⁴ If you are not sure what immigration benefit you might be eligible for, you can ask the organization if they can do a general immigration consultation, where they will ask you broader questions to be able to tell you if you qualify for any immigration relief.

⁵ Given the tremendous need for immigration help right now, many lawyers and organizations may be unable to schedule you an appointment right away. You may need to call several times to get an appointment. Some organizations keep waitlists and will call you once they are able to talk with you. Other organizations do not keep a waitlist and you may need to call again after some time has passed to see if they can meet with you. If you are working with a social worker, a shelter advocate, or religious leader, they may be able to provide a "warm referral" (by calling a lawyer or organization to make the connection for you).

National Immigration Legal Services Directory

Welcome to the National Immigration Legal Services Directory. Use the options below to search for immigration legal services providers by state, county, or detention facility. Only nonprofit organizations that provide free or low-cost immigration legal services are included in this directory. If you have questions, please see our list of [frequently asked questions](#) or email us at directory@immigrationadvocates.org.

[+ Add Organization](#) | [Print](#)

Search by Zip Code [Go](#)
 Search by Detention Facility [Select a detention facility](#) [Go](#)

Search by State

The **orange arrow** points to the dropdown box where you can change the language. Use the search boxes or click on a state in the map to find immigration legal service providers.

B. Legal Help for Cases in Immigration Court

If you have a case in immigration court, the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) has a [List of Pro Bono Legal Service Providers](#), which is updated four times a year (in January, April, July, and October). The List is only in English and is sorted by state and immigration court. The List includes nonprofit organizations and private lawyers. For many, it gives the contact information for the office and information about their hours, services offered, and languages spoken.

List of Pro Bono Legal Service Providers



The Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), Office of Policy, Public Resources Program (PRP) administers the [List of Pro Bono Legal Service Providers](#) for the "List." The List is provided to individuals in immigration proceedings and contains information on non-profit organizations and attorneys who have committed to providing at least 50 hours per year of pro bono legal services before the immigration court location where they appear on the List. The List also contains information on pro bono referral services that refer individuals in immigration court proceedings to pro bono counsel.

Published quarterly (January, April, July, and October), the List is central to EOIR's efforts to improve the amount and quality of

The **blue circle** shows the link to get to the List of Pro Bono Legal Service Providers.

The List has sections based on immigration court locations. If you live in a state without an immigration court, that state will not be listed. Instead, to find legal help near that location, choose the state where your immigration court hearing will be.

C. Finding Private Lawyers

If a legal services organization or private law office through the IAN Legal Services Directory or the EOIR List of Pro Bono Legal Service Providers cannot take your case, you can ask if they can recommend someone else. Ask for the name and contact information of the recommendation and any information about when and how best to contact them.

Another place to check is the American Bar Association's List of [Bar Directories and Lawyer Finders](#). Click on your state to see if the state has an official list of lawyers you can search. Each state's list is different, so we cannot describe how to use each one here. For many, you can search for the "practice area," which means the type of law you want the lawyer to know about. You should choose "immigration." Note that these state websites might only be in English.

The American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) has a search page, [Find an Immigration Lawyer](#), which is available in English and Spanish. You can search for an immigration lawyer based on the immigration issue you have (click on "What type of lawyer do I need?" if you are not sure), what language the lawyer speaks, and where they are located (enter city, state, and country or search by distance from a specific zip code). This list is limited to immigration lawyers who are members of AILA and are licensed in at least one state so it might not include every immigration lawyer in your area, if they are not members of AILA. If you do not find a lawyer near you on AILA's webpage, consider the other options, mentioned above.

II. What to Look For in an Immigration Lawyer or Accredited Representative

The wrong help can hurt you and your case! Once you have found someone to work with, you should verify that they are authorized to represent you in an immigration case.

A. Are They a Licensed Lawyer?

If the person says they are a licensed lawyer, you can look them up to know whether they are really licensed and in "good standing" to practice law. To be in "good standing" means that the lawyer has an active license to practice law and is not currently suspended or disbarred – in other words, they have not lost their law license.

It is important to know that immigration lawyers may have their office in one state even though their license is from a different state. For example, an immigration lawyer may work in an office in Oregon, but be licensed in Maryland. This is not uncommon for immigration lawyers and does not automatically mean that they cannot help you in your immigration case. As long as they have an active license from somewhere in the U.S., that license lets them do immigration law anywhere in the U.S.⁶

To check whether someone is a licensed lawyer, you will need to know their name and the state(s) where they are licensed. Then, you can use the American Bar Association's [Lawyer Licensing](#) page to learn how to check each lawyer licensed in the state. For some states, you can check this online; for others, you will need to call to ask the state licensing office.

B. Are They a DOJ Accredited Representative?

Department of Justice (DOJ) accredited representatives must be employed by a nonprofit organization that has been recognized by the Department of Justice to provide representation to low-income immigrants. If you are working with someone who says they are a DOJ accredited representative, you can check to see if they are on the lists that the DOJ keeps and updates. One list, the [Recognized Organizations and Accredited Representatives](#) list, is sorted by the name of the organizations who have accredited representatives. The second list, the [Accredited Representatives Roster](#), is sorted by the last name of the accredited representative.⁷

If you find a person's name and it says "DHS only" next to it, they have "partial accreditation." This means that they can only represent clients in cases with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). A partially accredited representative can advise clients on which application to file, help them complete the application, and attend USCIS interviews with them. However, they cannot do EOIR cases (in other words, they cannot represent clients in immigration court or at the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA)).

If you have a case in immigration court, a DOJ accredited representative with "full accreditation" can take cases with USCIS and EOIR, which means they can also take cases in front of the immigration court and the BIA. If there is no "DHS only" next to the person's name on the DOJ lists, that person is fully accredited. If you have a case in immigration court, look for a name that does not have "DHS only" next to it.

⁶ If a lawyer's license is not from the state they are working in, they may not be able to help you with other legal issues you may have outside of your immigration case, including family law or criminal law cases.

⁷ Given how long these lists are, you may want to press [Ctrl] + [F] (or [Command] + [F] on Mac) to search for the name of a specific person or organization.

Tips for Choosing and Working with a Lawyer or DOJ Accredited Representative

- **Ask questions about what areas of immigration law they focus on in their work.** Immigration law is so complicated that many lawyers only do some types of immigration work. For example, if you have a case in immigration court, someone who focuses on business immigration may not be the best choice. Instead, choose someone who does more “removal defense.”
- USCIS and immigration courts will only accept immigration applications in English. However, **your lawyer or DOJ accredited representative should make sure that you understand what the forms are asking and review the information in a language you understand.** You should never sign an application if it has not been translated or interpreted for you in your language first.
- **Review the completed immigration forms and ask any questions *before* you sign.** Only sign if you know and understand what the form says. If you do not understand, ask your lawyer or DOJ accredited representative for more information.
- **Ask for a copy of the completed, filed application.** Save it carefully!

III. Avoid Scams & Notario Fraud

Remember that, generally, if someone is not a licensed immigration lawyer or DOJ accredited representative, they probably are not authorized to practice immigration law.

In some Latin American and European countries, a notario público (“notary public”) has similar training to lawyers and is authorized to represent others. However, in the U.S., having a notary license only means the person can authenticate your signature or identity. It does not mean the person has any legal training at all and it does not authorize a notary to give legal advice or to practice law.

Some notaries know that there is confusion about what they can do and they use this to make people believe they are qualified to practice immigration law when they are not.

This is called notario fraud. Sometimes the notario may really want to help, but they still are not a good option because they do not have proper training.

Notarios can ruin the cases or lives of their victims, including by:

- **Filing the wrong application form(s) and/or completing the forms incorrectly.** USCIS may reject or deny the application, which the notary may hide from their clients and/or they may try to charge more money to “correct” their own error.
- **Adding information or details to an application that are not true, to make a client seem eligible for the immigration benefit.** Often, the client is not even aware of what the notario has put in the application. Still, if the client signs the form(s), it is under the penalty of perjury, saying the information in the application is true. This can lead USCIS to believe that the noncitizen has committed fraud by lying to get an immigration benefit. This can hurt any future application the applicant tries to submit. USCIS can also deny the application and start deportation proceedings against the applicant.
- **Missing deadlines to file applications or to provide more information to USCIS.** This can lead to a denial and, in some cases, the start of deportation proceedings against the applicant. In some instances, the applicant will not be able to refile the application – they lost their only chance.
- **Not filing anything at all, despite charging high fees.** The client may believe they have an application pending when they do not. Instead, they are left vulnerable to detention and deportation and may lose the chance to file an application.

If you choose a licensed immigration lawyer or DOJ accredited representative, you are much less likely to have these problems.

A. How to Avoid Notarios & Scams

Given the harms that notario fraud can cause, it is important to know what to look for so you avoid notarios. Some statements [notarios commonly make](#) include the following, which are **misleading or completely wrong**:

- ✗ Claiming you are eligible for a green card based only on the fact you have been in the U.S. for at least 10 years.
- ✗ Claiming you are eligible for immigration status based on having a child with special needs.

- ✗ Claiming they can get you a work permit quickly or without any wait.
- ✗ Guaranteeing a win in your case.

If the person who says they can help you in your immigration case makes statements like these, be cautious! Try to get another opinion from a licensed immigration lawyer or DOJ accredited representative. You can read more about how to pick a good lawyer on [page 5](#).

Other Tips⁸

Here are other steps you can take to help you avoid notarios and scams:

- ✓ Get a copy of the lawyer's business card.
- ✓ Do not sign any blank immigration forms or any documents that you do not understand.
- ✓ Request a receipt for any payments you make and be sure it includes the date you made the payment, how much you paid, and what the payment was for.
- ✓ Do not pay for blank, government immigration forms.
- ✓ Request a copy of anything you sign, including any contracts or immigration forms you have signed.

Other important things to know:⁹

- USCIS and EOIR will not ask you to make payments for your case over the phone or email, via wire transfer, or through applications such as PayPal, Venmo, or CashApp.
- Watch out for individuals posing as government officials, particularly on social media. USCIS and EOIR will not contact you about your case through your social media account. For other official information (not specific to your case), make sure you are on the official government websites or verified social media accounts. Official government websites end with *.gov*.

⁸ Adapted from Public Counsel, *Notario Fraud: How to Protect Yourself*, <https://publiccounsel.org/issues/immigrants-rights/notario-fraud/>.

⁹ For more information on common immigration scams, see USCIS, *Common Scams*, Last Reviewed/Updated: 02/21/2023, <https://www.uscis.gov/scams-fraud-and-misconduct/avoid-scams/common-scams>.

B. What to Do if You Were the Victim of a Scam or Notario Fraud

If you have been the victim of a scam or notario fraud, you may be very worried about what will happen in your immigration case and if there is any way to fix the problems the notario or scammer caused you.

We recommend that you first speak with a qualified immigration lawyer who can assess your situation and if any options may be available to you. They may also be able to tell you what the best next steps are, depending on your goals and the possible risks, or they may be able to refer you to another lawyer who can help. You can read more about where to find a good lawyer on [page 1](#) and how to pick a good lawyer on [page 5](#).

You may also wish to report what happened to you and there are different options available:

- **Report to the police.** You can report the scam or notario and what they did to you to the police. If you do, be sure to get a copy of the police report as proof of what happened to you. You may want to speak to a lawyer before contacting the police about the risks and benefits of reporting to the police.
- **Report to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC).** The FTC is the U.S. consumer protection agency. The FTC will not resolve an individual complaint, but your report can lead to an investigation and prosecution. You can go to the FTC's [Report Fraud](#) website to file a report. You may want to speak to a lawyer before filing a complaint about the risks and benefits of sharing your information with the federal government. You can also ask a lawyer if there is a similar *state* agency that would take your complaint.
- **Report a lawyer to their state's licensing office.** If you worked with a lawyer and believe their advice or behavior harmed you, you can file a complaint with the state bar association where that lawyer is (or was) licensed. The [Lawyer Licensing](#) and [Bar Directories and Lawyer Finders](#) pages may help you find the right contact for a specific state. However, searching "lawyer complaint + [*the state the lawyer is/was licensed in*]" online should bring up the exact webpage for filing a complaint in that state. States may also have a [Client Protection Fund](#)¹⁰ that can provide reimbursements for lost money caused by the dishonest actions of a lawyer licensed in that state. It is important to review that state's requirements and procedure to file a complaint or request a reimbursement. Speaking to a lawyer may help you put together a stronger complaint or request for reimbursement.

¹⁰ This list, by the National Client Protection Organization, gives the information and website for each state's version of a Client Protection Fund. It is unclear when it was last updated, but it can be a useful starting point for gathering information.

- **For cases in immigration court, file a complaint with the EOIR.** You can file a [complaint](#) about lawyers, DOJ accredited representatives, scams, or notario fraud to EOIR's [Fraud and Abuse Prevention Program](#). You can do this by sending an email to their Fraud Complaint inbox at EOIR.Fraud.Program@usdoj.gov. If the complaint is about a lawyer or DOJ accredited representative, you can submit a completed [Form EOIR-44](#). Be sure to follow the form instructions carefully. You may want to speak with a lawyer before filing a complaint to know whether it could affect any immigration case you have.
- **For applications or petitions with USCIS, file a complaint with USCIS.** To report an immigration scam or notario fraud, you can use the [USCIS Tip Form](#). Again, you may want to speak with a lawyer before filing a complaint to know whether it might affect any immigration case you have.

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