



Understanding your immigration case

A plain-language guide to the help our clinic offers.

This guide explains, in plain language, the kinds of help our clinic offers. It does not replace legal advice – it is here so you understand what is being asked of you and why, so we can work together with less confusion and more trust.

1

Find your situation in the index.

2

Read the three short parts: what it is, why we ask, what happens next.

3

Ask us anything. Nobody has to do this alone.

Questions? We are here.

Call or text (561) 445-6141 · info@dignitytoolkit.org · dignitytoolkit.org

Free legal help: ActionNYC 800-354-0365 or dial 311. This guide does not replace legal advice.



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1 Asking the Judge to Reopen Your Case

What is this?

If you missed a court date or your case was decided without you, there is a form that asks the judge to give you another chance. This is called a Motion to Reopen.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask why you missed court, and whether you got the notice, because the judge can only reopen the case for specific reasons - for example, you never received the notice, you were sick, or you were in custody. The more detail you give us, the stronger the request.

What happens next?

This can take weeks or months for the judge to decide. Filing on time matters a great deal - in many cases there is a strict 180-day deadline, so tell us about this as soon as you know about it, not later.

2 Moving Your Case to a New Court

What is this?

If your family moves to a different city, your court case usually needs to move with you. This is called a Motion to Change Venue.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask for your new address and the date you moved because the new court needs proof that you actually live in its area. Getting this exactly right avoids delays.

What happens next?

You will also need to file a separate Change of Address form. Do both together - filing only one of the two is one of the most common mistakes families make.

3 Asking for More Time Before Your Hearing

What is this?

Sometimes a family needs more time before a court date - for example, to find a lawyer or finish another application first. This is a Motion for Continuance.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask exactly why you need more time because the judge wants a specific, good reason - not just "we need more time."

What happens next?

The judge may say yes or no. If the judge says no, your original court date stays the same, so we keep preparing as if it might not be granted.



4 Getting a Family Member Out of Detention (Bond)

What is this?

If a family member is detained, a judge can sometimes set a bond - an amount of money that lets them be released while the case continues. We help prepare the paperwork asking the judge to set or lower a bond.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask about income, savings, family ties, and who could sponsor them because the judge wants to see the person has a stable place to live and people who will make sure they return for future court dates. Honest, specific answers matter more than large numbers.

What happens next?

If the family truly cannot afford the bond amount set by the judge, there are bond funds that may help - we can refer you. We do not represent you at the bond hearing itself; a lawyer does that part.

5 Appealing a Judge's Decision

What is this?

If a judge decided your case and you disagree, you may be able to ask a higher court - the Board of Immigration Appeals - to look at it again. This is an Appeal.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask what specifically the judge said and why you think it was wrong because the appeal must explain a real legal or factual mistake, not just that you disagree with the outcome.

What happens next?

This deadline is only 30 days from the judge's decision and it cannot be extended for any reason - contact us the same day you get a decision if you think you want to appeal.

6 Stopping a Deportation in an Emergency

What is this?

If removal is about to happen and there is a legal reason it should not, there is an emergency request called a Motion for Stay of Removal.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask what is scheduled and when because this is extremely time-sensitive - every hour matters.

What happens next?

We connect you with an attorney immediately rather than completing paperwork first. Do not wait to reach us if you believe removal is imminent.



7 Written Statements We May Ask You For

What is this?

Many cases need written statements - from you, from family, or from friends - describing what happened or what your life is like. These are called affidavits, declarations, or letters of support.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask for specific details (dates, places, names) rather than general statements because specific facts are what judges and officers find convincing. We also ask people who know you well to write letters, because their firsthand knowledge matters.

What happens next?

Whoever signs a statement should read it carefully first and make sure it says only what is true and what they actually witnessed, in their own words.

8 Asking for Asylum

What is this?

Asylum is protection for people who cannot safely return to their country because they were harmed, or fear being harmed, because of who they are, what they believe, or a group they belong to.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask very detailed questions about what happened to you, when, and by whom, because the application and your own statement need to match exactly - even small differences in dates can create doubt later, so it's better to say "I don't remember exactly" than to guess.

What happens next?

This is a serious legal case that always needs a lawyer or accredited representative to review it before it's filed. We help gather your story and evidence; we do not decide or file this alone.

9 A Special Program for Certain Nationalities (NACARA)

What is this?

NACARA is a special, older law that lets certain people from specific countries and time periods ask to stay in the U.S. and eventually get a green card.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask about your nationality and exactly when you arrived because eligibility depends on very specific dates and countries - not everyone qualifies, even from the same country.

What happens next?

An attorney checks eligibility carefully before anything is filed, since this is a narrow and specific program.



10 Removing the Conditions on a 2-Year Green Card

What is this?

If you got a green card through marriage, it is often "conditional" for 2 years. Before it expires, you must file to remove the conditions and get the permanent 10-year card.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask for proof your marriage is real and ongoing - joint bank accounts, leases, photos - because that is exactly what USCIS is checking for.

What happens next?

This must be filed in the 90 days before the 2-year card expires. If the marriage has ended through divorce or abuse, this becomes more complex and needs an attorney.

11 Help for Survivors of Abuse (VAWA)

What is this?

If you were abused by a U.S. citizen or permanent resident spouse, parent, or child, you may be able to petition for yourself, without that person's knowledge or permission. This is protected under a law called VAWA.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask about your safety first, before anything else, because your safety plan matters more than any form. What you tell us is kept confidential and is protected from being shared with your abuser.

What happens next?

We connect you directly with an attorney who specializes in this - we only help gather documents, and only with your ongoing, informed agreement at every step.

12 Help for Victims of Crime (U Visa)

What is this?

If you were the victim of certain serious crimes in the U.S. and helped, or are willing to help, police or prosecutors, you may qualify for a U visa.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask for details of the crime and any police report because you need a certification from law enforcement confirming your cooperation - this is a required part of the process and can take time to obtain.

What happens next?

This is a longer process; certifications can take months. We refer you to an attorney for full case management from the start.



13 Help for Survivors of Trafficking (T Visa)

What is this?

If you were a victim of human trafficking - forced labor or forced sexual exploitation - you may qualify for a T visa, which protects you and can lead to a green card.

Why do we ask you this?

We only ask what you are comfortable sharing, at your own pace - you never have to describe more than you are ready to.

What happens next?

We connect you immediately with an organization trained specifically in trafficking survivor support - they will guide the rest of the process with you.

14 Cancelling a Removal Order Based on Time in the U.S. and Family Hardship

What is this?

If you have lived in the U.S. for many years and have close family who would suffer serious hardship if you were removed, there may be a way to cancel the removal and get a green card.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask for proof of how long you've lived here (leases, pay stubs, school records) and details about your family's specific hardship, because both the time and the hardship must be proven with real documents, not just stated.

What happens next?

This is decided at a full hearing with an attorney arguing on your behalf - we help gather the years of documentation this requires, which can take real time, so start early.

15 Petitioning for a Family Member

What is this?

If you are a U.S. citizen or permanent resident, you may be able to petition for certain family members to immigrate - a spouse, child, parent, or sibling, depending on your status.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask for documents proving the family relationship (marriage certificate, birth certificate) because that relationship is the entire basis of the petition and must be proven clearly.

What happens next?

We also check the family member's immigration history for any past removal order or unlawful entry, because those can complicate the process significantly and may need an attorney.



16 Applying for a Green Card from Inside the U.S. (Adjustment of Status)

What is this?

If you are already in the U.S. and eligible, you may be able to apply for a green card without leaving the country. This is called Adjustment of Status.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask about your entry into the U.S. and any past immigration violations because certain issues (unlawful presence, prior removal orders) can make you ineligible or require an extra waiver step.

What happens next?

You will also need a medical exam from an approved doctor (civil surgeon) as part of this process - we can help you find one.

17 Waivers - Asking to Forgive a Problem in Your Immigration History

What is this?

Some immigration problems (past unlawful presence, certain past actions) can be forgiven if you can show that a qualifying family member would suffer extreme hardship without you. This is a Waiver.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask very detailed questions about your family member's health, finances, and circumstances because "extreme hardship" is a high legal standard that needs real, specific proof - not general statements.

What happens next?

This is one of the most legally complex documents we handle - an attorney writes the hardship argument itself; we help gather the supporting facts and documents.

18 Keeping Your Case Updated: Address and Who Represents You

What is this?

The court and immigration authorities must always know your current address, and must know who is helping you with your case, even if it's not a full attorney.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask you to confirm your address every time we meet because a missed notice sent to an old address can result in an order against you without you ever knowing about the hearing.

What happens next?

If you move, tell us immediately - this needs to be filed right away, often together with other paperwork.



19 Getting Permission to Work (Work Permit / EAD)

What is this?

A work permit (Employment Authorization Document, or EAD) lets you legally work in the U.S. while your case is pending, if you qualify.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask about your specific immigration case type because the category you qualify under determines the form and timing - guessing this wrong is one of the most common reasons applications are delayed or denied.

What happens next?

If paying the fee is a hardship, there is a fee waiver form we can also help with, if you qualify based on income.

20 Understanding the "Asylum Clock" and Work Permit Timing

What is this?

If you have applied for asylum, there is a running "clock" that must reach a certain number of days before you can get your first work permit. Delays in your own case can sometimes stop this clock.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask what has happened in your case (continuances, missed hearings) because certain actions - even ones you didn't cause - can stop or restart the clock, and that changes when you can apply for work authorization.

What happens next?

If the clock has stopped for a reason that wasn't your fault, an attorney may be able to get it restarted - this is worth checking rather than assuming nothing can be done.

21 Your Biometrics (Fingerprints) Appointment

What is this?

As part of many applications, USCIS will schedule you for an appointment to take your fingerprints and photo. This is called a biometrics appointment.

Why do we ask you this?

We confirm the date, time, and location with you carefully because missing this appointment without rescheduling can cause your whole application to be considered abandoned.

What happens next?

If you truly cannot make the appointment, you can request to reschedule once, but do this as early as possible, not the day of.



22 Getting Your I-94 Record and Social Security Number

What is this?

Your I-94 is the official government record of when and how you entered the U.S. Once you have a valid work permit, you can also apply for a Social Security Number.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask for your exact entry date and name as it appears on your documents because even small mismatches can prevent the online I-94 lookup from finding your record.

What happens next?

These are simple administrative steps that don't need a lawyer - a trained volunteer can help you with both.

23 Becoming a U.S. Citizen (Naturalization)

What is this?

If you have had a green card long enough and meet other requirements, you may be able to apply to become a U.S. citizen. This is called Naturalization.

Why do we ask you this?

This isn't something our clinic handles directly, but it's very common and there are trusted organizations that run free naturalization clinics regularly.

What happens next?

We will connect you with one of those organizations and give you their contact information, so you don't have to figure this out alone.

24 DACA - Protection for Young People Who Arrived as Children

What is this?

DACA can offer protection from deportation and a work permit for certain young people who arrived in the U.S. as children. Rules around DACA change often.

Why do we ask you this?

This is a fast-changing area of law, so we refer these cases to organizations that track the current rules and deadlines closely and can give you accurate, up-to-date guidance.

What happens next?

We will give you the name and contact information of a trusted organization that handles DACA cases regularly.



25 TPS - Temporary Protection Based on Your Country of Origin

What is this?

Temporary Protected Status (TPS) protects people from certain designated countries from deportation, usually because of war, disaster, or other extreme conditions there. It is temporary and depends on your country's current designation.

Why do we ask you this?

Designations and deadlines change often based on government decisions, so this needs an organization that is actively watching for updates specific to your country.

What happens next?

We will connect you with an organization that specializes in TPS and monitors these changes closely.

26 When Your Case Needs a Different Kind of Help

What is this?

Some situations are outside what our clinic can prepare directly - for example, a case that has gone to federal court, a case involving a past arrest or criminal charge, or simply a time when we don't have enough volunteers available.

Why do we ask you this?

We ask about any past arrests or court involvement early, even if it feels uncomfortable, because it can change the entire strategy for your case, and it's much better for your lawyer to know from the start than to be surprised later.

What happens next?

In all of these situations, we connect you directly with an organization that specializes in exactly this kind of case, and we make sure you leave with their name, phone number, and what to expect.