

DC-MD Justice for Our Neighbors

DC-MD Justice for Our Neighbors (JFON) saw continued improvement and growth in 2016. Our unique model allows us to reach more people than a traditional law office. We hold monthly clinics at four United Methodist Churches across the region, where potential new clients meet with an experienced attorney for in-depth consultations. By coming to clients' communities first, instead of asking them to initially visit our office, the JFON model breaks down barriers that prevent many from taking the first step. As a ministry, by coming to clients first, we demonstrate our belief that we are all equal in God's eyes.

Clinic volunteers meet clients and provide refreshments, childcare, and fellowship. Volunteers are trained and conduct initial intakes before the attorney consultations. Volunteers learn about immigrants' realities, and we fulfill our mission of educating the community.

In 2016, the attorney opened 200 new cases and served clients from 32 countries. We provided services for a variety of types of cases. "Advice and counsel" is our most crucial and frequent service. Instead of receiving a quick case rejection or acceptance, as in most law offices, potential clients receive an in-depth, holistic analysis of their situations. We strive to empower clients with knowledge so they can exercise agency over their lives. We employ an initial phone screening to learn each general situation and provide tailored instructions for preparation. At clinics, the attorney discerns available options for legal relief and explains each client's legal situation. Unfortunately, some potential clients have no legal options, and explaining this is a critical service. Immigrants are frequent targets of immigration scams, and "notarios" advertise green cards for thousands of dollars, take clients' money, and disappear. We explain why there may be no relief, which empowers clients to avoid scams.

Our next most frequent case type is asylum. Asylum seekers flee persecution and must prove they meet the legal definition of a refugee. Asylum cases are the most time-consuming, necessitating a lengthy application, legal argument, personal declaration, and evidence which is often extremely difficult to obtain. The attorney came to DC-MD JFON with asylum expertise, particularly working with survivors of torture and gender-based violence. Baltimore is among the top five areas that mothers with children seeking asylum relocate to after release from detention for their case duration, and the DC/Maryland area is among the top relocation sites in the country.

We handle other types of humanitarian-based claims. Immigrant victims of crime in America may be eligible for a "U visa." "T visas" are for victims of human trafficking. The Violence Against Women Act offers protection to immigrants married to abusive Americans. Special Immigrant Juvenile Status is available to children who have been abandoned, abused, or neglected by a parent and are determined to be safest in America. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is available to certain young adults who were brought to the U.S. without documentation as children. All of these forms of relief require extensive legal research and documentation, and many can lead to green cards and citizenship. We provide representation "affirmatively" or "defensively." Some immigrants fleeing violence can obtain visas before they leave, and thus enter the U.S. legally. However, the majority cannot. They must make the dangerous trek across the border without documentation, and are immediately placed into immigration detention and removal proceedings. They apply for relief "defensively," while those who entered with documentation apply "affirmatively." Immigrants enter removal proceedings for other reasons, and we represent them as well. Removal cases are extremely complex, and require frequent court appearances.

We provide representation on many family-based applications to help immigrants keep their families together, and on naturalization applications to help eligible clients become citizens. We help clients who are elderly or have disabilities, and are proud to represent our most vulnerable community members.

We help clients apply for work permits, which empowers them to survive while awaiting the adjudication of their cases, which often takes years. We help replace lost or expired documentation. We help clients obtain fee waivers whenever possible, as government fees for certain applications are high. Under the "Freedom of Information Act," we force government agencies to provide us all their records on a client.

Our services make a real difference. We recently gave an Ethiopian refugee who endured extreme persecution in her country and homelessness in the U.S. a green card and work permit. We won a deportation case against a Nigerian grandmother who had taken the poor advice of a defense attorney and pled guilty to a crime she did not commit. We have secured DACA for numerous young adults who were granted the ability to stay in the U.S. and work. These are just a few success stories of immigrants finding safety and uniting with their families here because of our ability to provide this ministry.

DC-MD JFON has gone through a period of growth this year. We conducted an evaluation with National JFON and identified areas of needed improvement. We conducted trainings at each clinic, and improved processes and procedures. We implemented a centralized scheduling system in which potential clients call the office and receive a more detailed questionnaire to spot urgent issues, schedule strategically, and provide detailed information before the clinic. We host interns and volunteers, and hired our first part-time legal assistant, which allowed us to see more clients. We moved to a new office space, which is more functional, friendly, professional, and accessible.

We continued numerous advocacy and outreach efforts. We conducted Know Your Rights presentations, and wrote letters alone and in coalitions to urge our lawmakers and leaders to take pro-immigrant positions on numerous issues.

By working on over 200 cases for clients from over 30 countries on over 20 different types of cases, we have been able to serve a large swath of the population in need. We are thankful for the ability to participate in this ministry and empower our immigrant brothers and sisters to live safe, free lives with their families, and look forward to serving even more.