



# LAW WEEK COLORADO

## Firms Join Together in Asylum Program

*Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network turns to firms for asylum interview prep*

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LAW WEEK COLORADO

A group of law firms have been working with the Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network in a first-of-its-kind program to help asylum seekers, and so far, it seems to be working.

Davis Graham & Stubbs, Gibson Dunn, Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton and Wilmer Hale have partnered with the immigration legal aid organization to offer assistance on a recurring and rotating basis to asylum seekers who are preparing for interviews that can determine whether they're allowed to stay in the U.S. For RMIAN, having that constant flow of volunteers allows it to serve more people with less time spent training attorneys. The early results of the Preparing Asylum Seekers for Success, or PASS program, means it might soon be replicated in other parts of the country.

The program puts attorneys in touch with asylum seekers to prepare them for credible fear interviews — the step of the process where they give their story to an immigration judge and explain the risks facing them in their home country. David Hsu, an attorney at Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton in Denver, said they focus on strengthening their stories, much in the same way someone might prepare for a college application or job interview.

Often, their stories start out in general terms that would lead immigration judges to ask follow up questions in order to glean more information about why the person should be allowed to seek asylum in the U.S. By helping them tell a strong story from the start, the asylum seekers are able to present their situation and increase their chances of receiving a positive decision.

Karam Saab said he worked with a newspaper reporter from Venezuela who told him her story in roughly a minute. Through asking her questions and pulling out details from the story, he found out that she had been confronted by government officials and faced threats for writing certain articles, and when her home was riddled with bullets one night, she decided to flee to the U.S.

He said asking those types of questions and helping asylum seekers prepare for their interviews is important so those crucial details and



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compelling stories are top of mind when they're before someone in the immigration court.

The four firms rotate as volunteers on a weekly basis, and individuals from the firms say how many cases they can take. That rotation allows firms to offer as much assistance as they're able and ensures that RMIAN gets a steady flow of volunteers, Saab said.

### WHERE PASS STARTED

Laura Lunn, detention program managing attorney at RMIAN, saw the value in the interview prep model while working at the family detention center in Dilley, Texas, where attorneys worked on-site and helped prepare people for those interviews. Once she came to RMIAN, she started brainstorming how to implement a similar model. By working with a group of law firms, RMIAN can spend less time onboarding volunteers and have more assurance that there will be attorneys available to jump in and help.

For instance, RMIAN is able to do a group training with many attorneys at once and rely on firm mentors to onboard new

attorneys as needed.

“The sustainability of this is night and day,” Lunn said. “Now, we can refer out over 100 cases in six months.” Before starting the PASS Program, RMIAN numbers might be more like 20 per year for credible fear interviews.

Thus far, the program has seen positive results in terms of numbers helped, but Lunn said the qualitative impact has been positive as well, even if only measured anecdotally. She said the vast majority of cases receive positive decisions, though she doesn't have data. RMIAN is currently collecting data on past cases to determine its success and is coming up with new plans to collect that data going forward.

The program's ability to assist more people has also caught the eye of similar organizations around the country. Through working with the Immigration Justice Campaign, a joint initiative between the American Immigration Lawyers Association and the American Immigration Counsel, the program is being translated to at least one other venue. The campaign is looking to implement a similar program in New Jersey,

a site similar to Denver in that it is close to a detention center in Elizabeth, New Jersey, as well as an urban area with a lot of law firms.

“We're hoping to expand PASS program to meet the needs of asylum seekers,” Lunn said, regarding the program here in Denver as well as rolling out similar models elsewhere. She said the asylum process is shifting in the U.S., with U.S. Customs and Border Protection conducting interviews to screen people for asylum in addition to “asylum ban 2.0” — the executive order that requires asylum seekers to first seek asylum in a country they are passing through before arriving at the U.S. border.

“The PASS program is evolving and shifting to try to better meet the needs of asylum seekers when they're being attacked,” Lunn said. “We can lean on our partners at firms to represent them in interviews before the immigration court, in request for reconsideration and to brainstorm with us how to make better change when laws are being morphed and implemented right now.” •

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