



# Highlight on Resources & Services to Support Pro Bono Attorneys

Programs that Save Attorneys Time, Provide Corroborating Evidence, & Create Medical Connections

There are several resources and programs designed to support and increase the capacity and efficacy of attorneys and legal professionals working with clients. Some of these programs are specifically designed to help attorneys working on immigration matters and/or to help attorneys working in a pro bono capacity. Partnering with these programs increases an attorney's ability to effectively represent their clients. CILA highlights a few of these programs and services so that managers of pro bono programs can become familiar with the services and see if they are right to recommend to nonprofit staff and pro bono attorneys working with their organizations.

## Providing Case Support Through Legal Research

For pro bono attorneys that need some additional support, it may help to reach out to law students to help conduct research.

### University of Nebraska College of Law's Pro Bono Research Fellows Program

The University of Nebraska College of Law provides a research service through their Pro Bono Research Fellows Program. The program started in June 2019, and while it was not designed for working during the pandemic, the program lends itself well to remote work. Students can provide research support to attorneys nationwide covering a wide range of legal questions.



Through the program, law students are matched with attorneys to provide research on pro bono legal cases. The law school's website provides additional information about the [program](#) and a link to an [attorney application](#), where an attorney can fill out a short form regarding the project, such as providing a brief description, the time frame of when they need the information, and the project size or estimated number of hours of work for the project. Students also indicate their availability and areas of interest in a student application. Family law and immigration law are two of the areas specifically included that student fellows can express interest in when applying for the program. The law school also has a [Children's Justice Clinic](#) so there is also great interest in children's advocacy among students at the school.

Children's Immigration Law Academy (CILA)  
A Project of the American Bar Association  
Funded by the Vera Institute of Justice  
[www.cilacademy.org](http://www.cilacademy.org)

[Kala Mueller](#), Director of Public Interest Programs at the University of Nebraska College of Law, manages the Pro Bono Research Fellows Program and matches students with attorneys' projects. There is a screening process for students interested in participating in the program to assess students' strengths and to help ensure that attorneys partnering with the school have a good experience.

Thus far, over half of the research projects have focused on family law, and other projects have greatly varied in terms of subject matter. Mueller thought students would be excited to work on research questions involving children's cases regarding immigration and family law, noting that students have expressed interest in those areas. She also said, "For law students, it's about having a learning opportunity and the ability to assist in something that is a meaningful project."

The project is a potential value-add to pro bono attorneys, nonprofit organizations, and nonprofit organizations' pro bono programs. "Part of the beauty of working with students is that they have such great research tools at their fingertips," Mueller said. Additionally, the project partners with a member of the law school's library faculty to help the support the student, as needed. When Mueller matches a case with a student, she loops in a member of the College of Law Library Faculty so he can offer the student any tips to get started on the research assignment or to provide information on how he can support them in the project if needed.

While the law school designed the project to help support private attorneys engaged in pro bono work, students may also be able to help nonprofit staff attorneys who are providing free legal work to those in need. Potentially, nonprofit organizations could also work with students on a research question that is more generally applicable to the organization's work. Every request for assistance is assessed to ensure it meets the law school's definition of qualifying as pro bono work.

The program has worked with a local volunteer project that advertises the availability of law students to assist with research as part of their recruitment efforts. Mueller said, "We want more pro bono attorneys to get involved, and I think this is a good way to do that, to provide a little bit more assistance to take some of the work off of their plate." The additional support from law students can provide another incentive for pro bono attorneys to take on a case and can be emphasized during pro bono recruitment efforts.

### Bridging the International Divide

In a recent continuing legal education training hosted by the American Bar Association (ABA) Commission on Immigration, CILA presented in a panel regarding fact-gathering and case development in an asylum claim with speakers from Justice in Motion and the Cyrus R. Vance Center's Keep Families Together. Training recordings of [day one](#) and [day two](#) are available on the ABA's website for free, to ABA members and non-members alike. Both organizations provide services for cases involving forms of immigration humanitarian relief, which can be very beneficial for children's cases.





## Justice in Motion

[Justice in Motion's](#) mission is to "protect migrant rights by ensuring justice across borders." Justice in Motion's work centers on helping migrants who suffered employment or civil rights violations in the United States or Canada as well as migrants who are in the United States or Canada seeking humanitarian relief, such as asylum or Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) status, who need support across borders to

give them access to justice. The organization built a [defender network](#) of human rights professionals based in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.

Justice in Motion provides a model of cross-border collaboration and offers case facilitations with the defenders. An attorney may need the support of Justice in Motion if they need to serve a state lawsuit connected to SIJ on defendants in the country of origin, secure signatures for affidavits and other court documents, find public record such as birth certificates, death certificates, police records, investigate claims and finding evidence, locate missing clients in the country of origin, or help distribute any damages. Services are done for a fee which covers the defenders' time and any associated costs; the total cost depends on the case.

Additionally, Justice in Motion's pilot project [Child Detention Crisis Initiative](#) utilizes the defender network to collaborate with advocates working to expedite children's release from U.S. immigration detention/shelters. Justice in Motion can provide services when a child's release from detention or reunification is hindered by a lack of documents or other information from their country of origin or if the parent(s) of the detained child requires support in the country of origin. If a child is about to return to their country of origin or has returned, in some cases, defenders can help ensure release to the family member or custodian or help with custody issues or criminal charges.

Several resources are available on Justice in Motion's [website](#) to provide country of origin context for detained immigrant children and their families. One of the resources includes foreign law affidavits on paternity law for El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, which was as a result of a collaborative effort between CILA and Justice in Motion; this resource is also hosted on CILA's [website](#).

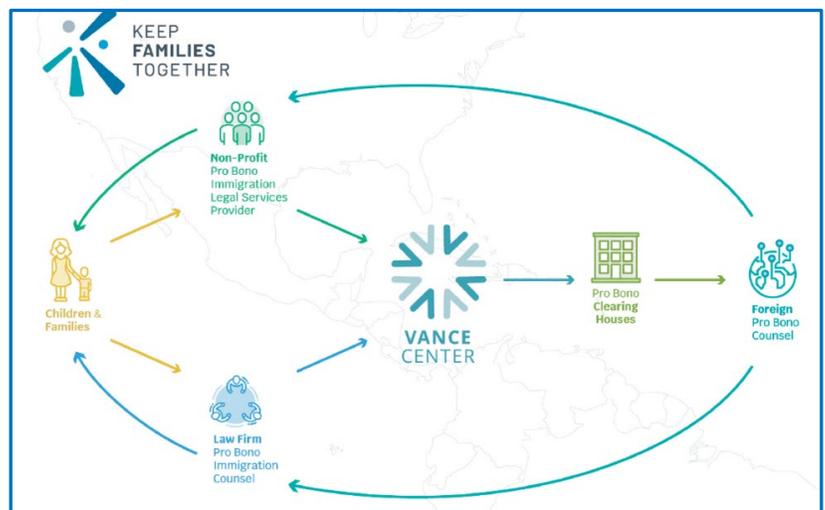
To learn more about Justice in Motion or find more information about their services, contact [legalaction@justiceinmotion.org](mailto:legalaction@justiceinmotion.org).

## Keep Families Together

Launched in 2018, [Keep Families Together](#) (KFT) is a special initiative of the [Cyrus R. Vance Center for International Justice](#). It identifies international pro bono co-counsel for attorneys and advocates in the United States working on pro bono immigration cases. The organization's work originally focused on unaccompanied children and family separation cases, and now assists any undocumented persons who need pro bono attorneys in their home country to collaborate with their legal representatives in the United States.

Jorge Escobedo is the Director of Pro Bono Partnerships at the Cyrus R. Vance Center for International Justice. He provided information regarding the initiative saying, "Keep Families Together is a free, international resource for the pro bono immigration sector across the United States and the globe. No request for international co-counseling is too small or too large and no country is off limits. Our pro bono attorneys abroad belong to the most prominent law firms in their jurisdictions, ensuring best-in-class services for any referrals made. KFT obtains critical identity documents and other forms of evidence as U.S. advocates pursue immigration relief for their pro bono immigration clients."

Services abroad include: drafting witness statements and affidavits, facilitating DNA tests to establish parental relationships, serving parents with documents, obtaining records, and finding expert testimony on foreign family law issues. The KFT's network of international pro bono counsel includes attorneys in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, India, and Mexico.



Contact Jorge Escobedo at [jescobedo@nycbar.org](mailto:jescobedo@nycbar.org) to learn more about Keep Families Together or to seek assistance for your pro bono immigration clients.

## Building a Medical Connection

Creating a connection with a medical partner can often make a significant difference in a case. In a recent [feature](#) on our [webpage](#) for creative models, CILA highlighted working with health professionals in a pro bono capacity. Support from medical partnerships can help in a variety of ways in immigration cases, such as conducting evaluations and supporting waivers. In this next highlight, CILA provides information on an organization that supports attorneys working with immigrants in detention, who have a health need.



## Migrant Clinicians Network

The [Migrant Clinicians Network](#) (MCN), an organization built to support clinicians working with migrants and their families, began the [Medical Review for Immigrants](#) (MRI) initiative in the summer of 2018. The initiative connects pro bono attorneys and nonprofit staff attorneys working with an immigrant client in detention with a physician to review medical records. The initiative has two goals in mind, to provide an advisory opinion regarding the nature, severity, and treatment needs regarding the individual's medical condition and for the physician to write a supporting letter, a letter of declaration, that can be used with an attorney's request for humanitarian parole or bond for their client. CILA sat down with [Deliana Garcia](#), MA, MCN's Director of International Projects and Emerging Issues, [Luis Retta](#), MCN's MRI Associate, and [Dr. Laszlo Madaras](#), MD, MCN's Chief Medical Officer, to learn more information regarding the organization and their initiatives.

The purpose of the MRI initiative is to help immigrants with health needs get released from detention and connected with the health treatment they need. The organization values continuity of care and after an individual is released, MRI helps the individual get connected with a low-cost health care provider to continue care, and provides records transfer, follow-up services, and case management to the individual after release. The organization featured the initiative in a recent [blog post](#), "Medical Review for Immigrants Connects Physicians and Pro Bono Attorneys to Help Immigrants in Detention with Urgent Health Issues." The blog post highlights the organization's work and describes how the organization has helped an attorney working in the Rio Grande Valley working with clients detained at the Port Isabel Detention Center. Additionally, a *Mother Jones'* [article](#) in February 2021 "The (Almost) Unbelievable Tortures of Steven Tendo" reports on a case that MCN worked on to provide a letter of declaration.

The MRI process begins with an attorney making a request for case assistance. That process includes an enrollment form and a consent form for the attorney and client to sign. With the client's consent, the attorney shares the client's information and medical records with MRI. The attorney also provides information regarding the timeline that they need information to support the case and whether a particular medical specialty is needed for the physician planning to review the medical records. For example, an attorney can specify that they are working with a



child client and need a physician who works in pediatrics or family medicine. A physician in the MRI network will review the medical records provided by the attorney and write a letter of declaration. MRI will work on cases nationwide, and they work with a network of about thirty-five physicians with various specialties. MRI can assist both children and adult clients, and they have experience providing letters for both a child and parent, for example. While in the past, they have had a physician review mental health behavioral records; the initiative's availability to do so is limited, so it is best to check in and see if their availability for this type of record review.

The physician's letter of declaration includes information at the beginning stating that the medical professional is not the treating physician of the client and includes information regarding the medical professional's background and experience. Then based on a review of the medical records, the physician provides a medical chart summary, conclusion, and recommendation. This could include their professional medical opinion on the patient's condition, any risks

involved in detention, an explanation of whether there is a medical emergency or any urgency regarding the need for treatment, and an opinion regarding release from detention. Sometimes, a physician may make a recommendation regarding an individual's treatment and that could include their medications. Their recommendations are based on the information available to the physician, and at times, they may need to ask for additional information or clarification.

MRI services fit best for a situation where an attorney sees a client exhibiting a medical need, and the attorney is not sure what extent of care the individual has received or if the treatment is adequate, and the individual needs to be released from detention to pursue clinical care. Records must exist for the physician to do a review of the records. It helps to have lab work, any imaging or studies that are relevant to the issue regarding why the individual needs to be released and the more current the records, the better, so the judge will find the physician's review relevant, current, and persuasive. An overwhelming amount of records is not necessary, and there is no cap on the number of records either; although, duplicates are unnecessary. MRI has internal and external resources to review records in other languages so there is no requirement to include an English translation of medical records in a request for a letter of declaration.

Sometimes attorneys struggle to obtain medical records from detention facilities, which is one reason MRI seeks a signed consent form as part of the initial process, and MRI will send a record request to a detention facility's medical unit, if needed. While it depends on the case, the facility, and the parties involved, in MRI's experience, after some work, they can typically get the records so a medical record review can be conducted and to get a second opinion regarding the client's medical needs.

#### **Additional Medical Resources**

- Medical and psychological evaluations: [Physicians for Human Rights](#)
- Forensic mental health evaluations: [Houston Immigration Legal Services Collaborative](#) (HILSC)



There are some limitations to the services provided. MRI will not examine any patients in this process; the physician's role is to review medical records. Additionally, they do not conduct evaluations to support asylum cases. There are some benefits to this limited role. It encourages more medical partners to volunteer their time to be involved so their time commitments are more concrete. Moreover, it helps the physicians produce the letters more quickly, which is often the need in these situations. Communication between the attorney and the physician goes through MRI. Attorneys' insights into judges are welcomed, so that the physician can focus and frame the letter regarding what is most helpful and needed in the case. To get more information regarding the MRI initiative or to request a letter of declaration to support a case, contact MRI at [mri@migrantclinician.org](mailto:mri@migrantclinician.org).

Additionally, MCN may be able to provide assistance if an attorney identifies a child in Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) detention with particular health care needs that would benefit from additional support and healthcare treatment upon release to a sponsor or in an age-out scenario. For example, there are some situations where a youth needs ongoing support and help receiving medical care or urgent medical attention. MCN can help support the youth and/or sponsor by explaining the particular health need, the urgency of the situation, and by helping provide connections to a medical provider with low-cost services. This helps children continue treatment and medical care after release from ORR. To get more information regarding a case with this need or about MCN more generally, contact [Deliana Garcia](mailto:deliana@migrantclinician.org), MA, MCN Director of International Projects and Emerging Issues at [dgarcia@migrantclinician.org](mailto:dgarcia@migrantclinician.org).

MCN also offers a [Witness to Witness](#) program to connect attorneys and clinicians with a volunteer therapist to be a witness to them, to give them some relief and support, while doing high stress work. The Witness to Witness program is available to individuals nationally. The program provides resources, interactive webinars, and peer support groups. Services are free or on a sliding scale and available to both nonprofit staff attorneys and pro bono attorneys doing high stress work. More information about the program can be found on the MCN [website](#). Contact [Kaethe Weingarten](mailto:kweingarten@migrantclinician.org), PhD at [kweingarten@migrantclinician.org](mailto:kweingarten@migrantclinician.org) with any questions and to get more information regarding the program and interactive webinars for organizations.

## Conclusion

CILA hopes this feature on different resources and services helps nonprofit organizations and pro bono programs get connected with existing programs that can help support advocates working with immigrant youth. These services can help pro bono attorneys and staff who need additional research support, assistance in corroborating a case on the merits or for release from detention, and help connecting clients with medical services and information. CILA is grateful to the featured organizations and programs for their work and for sharing information about how they can support pro bono attorneys and pro bono programs. If your organization has a creative model for pro bono engagement or ideas and resources to support and train pro bono attorneys, contact [cila@abacila.org](mailto:cila@abacila.org) to share your experience. Check out CILA's [webpage](#) on Creative Pro Bono Models for more ideas for pro bono programs.

