

Self-filing for Asylum Seekers: Volunteers with big hearts fill the attorney gap

For nearly a year, the Reformed Church of Highland Park has sponsored a program to assist asylum seekers to self-file their asylum applications. The asylum self-filing project is run by community volunteers who meet in three-person teams with an asylum seeker to help complete their applications in English. All volunteers attend training sessions to prepare for this process.

Asylum seekers are required to file for asylum within one year of their arrival in the United States. **Most are unable to find or to afford an attorney to take their cases.** By self-filing, they can meet the one-year deadline and apply for a work permit five months later. And they can continue to search for an attorney who may accept their cases later when they are closer to their court dates.

Susan “Bosco” Boscarino, is one of the volunteers assisting with the RCHP

project. A Securities Law Specialist by trade (and Board Secretary for the RCHP-Affordable Housing Corp), Bosco said “I’m all in” after receiving a call from Pastor Seth and speaking to the program’s coordinator, Ellen Whitt. Though she has a background in law, most volunteers do not, and this is not a requirement.



While the application for self-filing is 12 pages, the instructions are 40 pages long, and so **extensive training and supervision is provided by Ellen Whitt**, who happens to work for DIRE Legal (It’s important to note that DIRE Legal is NOT a part of this process and this is strictly a RCHP initiative). Ellen is a certified Board of Immigration Appeals representative, and so has extensive knowledge and training in this area of immigration law.

After the initial training, Bosco shadowed a more experienced application assistant, and a translator rounded out the team. **“And that’s how you learn, really, by shadowing the experienced filer** and listening to what they are saying to the asylum seeker.

Writing the narrative portion is the hardest because the applicant has to tell you about the suffering they endured in their country. This can be extremely emotional so it’s about learning to strike that balance between getting details, but not going so deep that they are re-traumatized while telling their story.”

“Our immigrations system is so messed-up – it's stacked up against anyone who's not an English speaker. They have a right to apply for asylum, and so we have to work within that system, such as it is.”

The self-file program has filed 25 applications since December of 2023. Most clients are from Central and South America but are also from other countries such as Chad and Swaziland. Bosco says that “this is a paperwork-heavy task and so can be a bit frustrating, but **it's a very good feeling when it's done, and you know you've helped that person.** Sitting with someone and hearing their story is very gratifying”

If you would like to volunteer for this project, either as an application assistant or a translator, you can **contact Ellen Whitt at whitt.ellen@gmail.com** While it is not required, we are especially looking for English speakers who can translate Spanish, Haitian Creole, or Farsi.

Interview by Deb Convery

Many thanks to Ellen Whitt for contributing to this article