

Avoiding Scams Against Immigrants



Do you need help figuring out the immigration process or filling out immigration forms? Whether you're renewing a Green Card, becoming a citizen, or trying to choose the right forms, immigration issues can be complicated, and it's important to do things right.

Choosing the right person to help you is almost as important as filling out the right form, or filling it out the right way. The help that you see advertised in store windows, on websites, in the newspaper, on the radio – even from people you know – can hurt you. People who call themselves *notarios* – or sometimes immigration experts – cannot help you. They will charge you money, but not give you *real* help. Sometimes, they do things that will hurt your chance to immigrate lawfully.

Even people who mean well – a friend, your pastor, a teacher, or a relative – can cause problems for you later. Helpers like these should only write or translate what you tell them to, not give you advice on what to say or which forms to use. To get help that helps you, work with people who are authorized by the U.S. government to help you. Working with them also will help protect you from people who will cheat you.

Dishonest people sometimes charge for blank government forms, say they have a special relationship with the government, or guarantee to get you results. They may promise to get you a winning slot in the Diversity Visa lottery if you pay a fee. They might charge a lot of money, supposedly to guarantee temporary protected status or get you benefits you don't qualify for. They are very clever about finding ways to cheat people.

Here is how to avoid scams and get the right help.

How to Avoid a Scam

- Don't go to a notario, notario público, or a notary public for legal advice. In the U.S., notarios are not lawyers: they can't give you legal advice or talk to government agencies for you, like the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) or the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA). A notary public doesn't have to be a lawyer either, and is not allowed to give you legal advice.
- Never pay for blank government forms. Government forms are free, though you'll probably have to pay when you submit them to USCIS. You can get free immigration forms at www.uscis.gov/forms, by calling USCIS at 1-800-870-3676, or by visiting your local USCIS office.
- Get immigration information from U.S. government websites. Some scammers set up websites that look like they are run by the government, but they aren't. Make sure that the website that looks like a government site is a dot gov (.gov). That means it is from the U.S. government.

- Don't let anyone keep your original documents, like your birth certificate or passport. Scammers may keep them until you pay to get them back.
- Never sign a form before it has been filled out, or a form that has false information in it. Never sign a document that you don't understand.
- Keep a copy of every form that you submit, as well as every letter from the government about your application or petition.
- You will get a receipt from USCIS when you turn in your paperwork. Keep it! It proves that USCIS received your application or petition. You will need the receipt to check on the status of your application, so be sure you get a copy.

How to Get the Right Help

Help is available, but there are rules about who can help you. Follow these rules to find help authorized by the U.S. government. Getting help from someone who's not qualified to give you legal advice – like a notario – can be worse than not getting any help. Two main groups are authorized to give you legal immigration advice or represent you: lawyers and accredited representatives.

Lawyers

Lawyers can give you advice and represent you. Lawyers, also called attorneys, must be a member of the “bar” – the professional association in their state. The state bar association can discipline, suspend, or even expel a lawyer for breaking the rules. Be sure the lawyer you choose is in good standing with the bar association. That means they're not in trouble for breaking the rules for lawyers. You can find a lawyer through government and non-government websites.

To find an immigration lawyer who doesn't charge or who charges low fees:

- Visit this state-by-state list from the U.S. Department of Justice: www.justice.gov/eoir/probono/states.htm
- Call USCIS at 1-800-375-5283 to ask about lawyers in your area.
- Visit this state-by-state list from the American Bar Association: www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_services/flh-home.html

To find a lawyer in your area who works in immigration:

- Visit this list from the American Immigration Lawyers Association. These lawyers may charge a fee to help you. www.aialawyer.com

To find out if someone is a lawyer, or to find out if a lawyer is in trouble for breaking the rules:

- Visit this site from the State Bar Associations. Click on your state to find the phone number you can call to ask about a specific lawyer. www.statebarassociations.org
- Visit the U.S. Department of Justice for this list of lawyers who are not allowed to practice law: www.justice.gov/eoir/discipline.htm

Accredited Representatives

Accredited representatives are not lawyers, but are authorized by the government to give legal immigration advice. They also may represent you. These representatives must work for an organization that's officially recognized by the U.S. government. The names of both the accredited representatives and these recognized organizations are on a list kept by the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) at the Department of Justice.

To find an accredited representative:

- Visit this state-by-state list of accredited representatives and the recognized organizations where they work. Only a person, not an organization, is authorized to represent you. Look at this list for the name of someone near you. The people on this list are accredited representatives as long as they work at the organization on the list. They may charge a fee to help you. www.justice.gov/eoir/ra/raroster.htm

Some other people are authorized by the government to help you, but they can't charge you a fee. Law students can give you legal advice, if they are supervised by a lawyer or accredited representative. Someone you may know in your community, known to USCIS as a "reputable individual," can represent you, but they cannot charge you – and they have to sign a legal document saying they won't take money from you.

Report Scams

Immigration scams are illegal. If you or someone you know has seen an immigration scam or been the victim of one, it's important to report it to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) or the attorney general of your state. Go to ftc.gov/complaint (or call 1-877-382-4357), or visit naag.org to find out how to contact the attorney general in your state. The FTC does not resolve individual complaints. Instead, the FTC enters complaints in a secure online database used by law enforcement worldwide, including many federal, state and local officials, who spot trends and build cases.

The more information you can give, the more helpful your report is to the person who will investigate. Investigators are grateful for as much information as you feel comfortable giving.

Learn how to avoid scams against immigrants at:

ftc.gov/immigration

Aprenda cómo evitar las estafas contra inmigrantes en:

ftc.gov/inmigracion



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