Immigration Glossary

This is a non-exhaustive list of definitions and term that might be useful while supporting our immigrant neighbors.

Term	Definition
'A' Number	A unique 9-digit number, preceded by the letter "A", which the Department of Homeland Security assigns to most noncitizens as a type of identification. It can commonly be found on an Employment Authorization Document (noted as "USCIS Number") or on a Notice to Appear for an individual in removal proceedings.
Adjustment of Status	The process through which certain noncitizens apply for permanent resident (that is, green card) status from within the United States, as opposed to applying from abroad. (Applying from abroad is referred to as "consular processing".) Prior immigration violations, such as unlawful entry, and certain criminal acts may make an applicant ineligible to apply from within the United States, though waivers (exceptions) may be available in some instances. A successful applicant for adjustment of status will receive a "green card" and is known as a lawful permanent resident.
Accompaniment	Accompaniment provides support to a specific person who fears a lack of due process during court-related processes and other daily activities. Accompaniment is often provided by advocates or trained volunteers from community organizations, particularly for immigrants, domestic violence survivors, and other vulnerable individuals. Accompaniment for our immigrant neighbors involves accompanying them to immigration court, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) check-ins, as well as to schools, hospitals etc. It is centered on the needs of the individual, to support and empower them to navigate an often intimidating and confusing legal system. An accompanier walks alongside the person, offering a sense of community and ensuring they are not alone. They do not provide any kind of legal advice.
Affirmative Asylum	The process in which certain asylum-seekers who are not in removal proceedings or who have never been ordered removed ask the U.S. government for asylum protection. An affirmative application for asylum is made to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), a subagency of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).
Alien	A person who is not a citizen of the United States and who is in any immigration status, including lawful permanent residents (holders of "green cards"), temporary visa holders, and undocumented foreign nationals.
Alternatives to Detention (ATD)	ICE programs using electronic monitoring or enhanced supervision which are used of in lieu of formal detention.
Apprehension	In immigration terms, the civil arrest of a noncitizen suspected of violating U.S. immigration law
Asylee	A person who has been granted asylum status in the U.S. Asylees are given certain legal rights, such as to be able to remain indefinitely in this country, to bring spouses and minor children to the U.S. as asylees, and to work legally. They also are eligible for some public benefits and to apply for lawful permanent residence (green card) after one-year.
Asylum	A legal status sought by a noncitizen who fears harm in their home country. Under U.S. law, to be granted asylum protection, an asylum seeker must meet the definition of a "refugee," so they must show the following: 1. That they are unable to return to their home country due to past persecution or a "well-founded" fear of (future) persecution. (Persecution is an act of serious harm done either by government officials or by people that the government is unable or unwilling to control.) 2. The feared persecution must be due to the applicant's race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. (Generally, fleeing one's country to avoid natural disasters or for economic reasons is not sufficient.)

	3. The applicant must not otherwise be barred from a grant of asylum, including having been resettled in a third country, or having committed acts that are prohibited under U.S. law. Asylum applications are adjudicated by either the Department of Homeland Security (the USCIS Asylum Office) or the Department of Justice (Immigration Court). An individual granted asylum (an "asylee") is eligible for their lawful permanent residency ("green card") after one year of physical presence in the U.S. as an asylee. Although asylees and refugees both meet the legal definition of a "refugee," they are treated differently under U.S. immigration law. A refugee applies for protection while abroad in a third country, and upon entry to the U.S., immediately has legal protection; an asylee enters the U.S either without status or with another form of immigration status and must apply for legal protection after having arrived in the U.S.
Asylum Seeker	A person who is applying for asylum.
Beneficiary	A noncitizen on whose behalf a relative (either a United States citizen, lawful permanent resident, or asylee/refugee) or United States employer has filed a petition. The purpose of the petition is for that person to receive legal immigration status as a result of this relationship.
Board of Immigration Appeals	The administrative appeals court responsible for interpreting and defining immigration laws. It is a subagency of the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) within the Department of Justice. The BIA has nationwide jurisdiction to hear appeals from certain decisions rendered by Immigration Judges and certain officials of the Department of Homeland Security. Adverse BIA decisions can be appealed to the federal courts through a "Petition for Review."
Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)	The agency responsible for providing immigration-related services and benefits, including certain humanitarian protections and visas, lawful permanent residence (green cards), and naturalization (citizenship). It is a subagency of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).
Court Watch	Court watch involves systematically monitoring court proceedings, collecting data, and providing oversight of the legal system. In terms of immigration, it is to promote public accountability and transparency in immigration courts, raise awareness about the lack of judicial independence in immigration adjudications, document due process violations and the politicization of proceedings, and bring visibility to these critical issues. Court watching is an observational and accountability role.
Credible Fear Interview (CFI)	A non-citizen who arrives in the United States with false or no documents may be subject to deportation without the opportunity to present a case to a judge (called Expedited Removal). However, if that person expresses a fear of persecution in their home country or a desire to apply for asylum, a USCIS Asylum Officer will conduct an abbreviated interview about this fear, called a "Credible Fear Interview." If successful at the CFI stage, the non-citizen is permitted to seek asylum before an Immigration Judge (defensive asylum).
Customs and Border Protection (CBP)	The agency responsible for protecting U.S. borders. Its agents are located at ports of entry along the border, as well as in international airports. It is a subagency of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).
Defensive Asylum	The process in which an asylum-seeker who is in removal (deportation) proceedings before the immigration court submits an application for asylum. The immigration court is part of the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), which is a subagency of the Department of Justice.
Department of Homeland Security (DHS)	An agency created by the Homeland Security Act of 2002 and which began operations in 2003. One of its primary responsibilities is the implementation and enforcement of immigration laws and policies. DHS absorbed the functions of many different agencies within the U.S. government, including the immigration responsibilities of the (now defunct) Immigration and Naturalization Service. These immigration activities are administered by the DHS division of Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS). (See separate Glossary listings for these divisions).

Deportation	The administrative process involving the removal of a person from the U.S. who is not a U.S. citizen. Under the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, the formal term for deportation was changed to "removal".
Detention	Immigration detention refers to the confinement of non-citizens by immigration authorities, typically by ICE or CBP while their immigration cases are processed or they are awaiting deportation. In September 2025, the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) issued a decision stating that any individual who entered without inspection (who crossed the border between ports of entry) is no longer eligible to seek release on bond from an immigration judge. As of September 2025, over 70% of noncitizens held in ICE detention had no criminal record. Many of those who did have criminal records had only been convicted of minor offenses, including traffic violations. In the U.S. most facilities are either actual prisons run by private prison companies or county jails that contract with ICE. There are only a handful of government-run facilities, but they also look and feel like a prison.
Dismissal	A dismissal in immigration court means that the judge closes the case without making a final decision about the individual's immigration status. An individual whose immigration court case was dismissed is no longer in removal proceedings, and they do not have a final order of removal issued against them. However, dismissal of immigration proceedings is typically "without prejudice," meaning that ICE may still initiate removal proceedings against the noncitizen again at a later time. Having removal proceedings dismissed may also be problematic for noncitizens who have been in the U.S. for less than two years, because ICE is subjecting individuals in this posture to "expedited removal," and detaining and deporting them without permitting them to have a full hearing before an immigration judge.
Employment Authorization Document (EAD)	A card verifying that a noncitizen is legally permitted to seek and obtain work in the U.S. To be eligible for this card, an individual must fall within one of several categories listed in the immigration laws. These categories include (but are not limited to) applicants for lawful permanent resident status, asylum-seekers, asylees, refugees, TPS holders, parolees, and individuals granted "deferred action" status. Usually, the application process requires payment of a fee and the issuance of a card for a limited, renewable period of time. This document is often referred to as a "work permit" and, in Spanish, as a "permiso" or "permiso de trabajo." Certain noncitizens must hold a valid work permit to seek and obtain employment, including asylum seekers, TPS holders, and parolees.
Expedited Removal	A non-citizen who arrives in the United States with false or no documents may be subject to deportation without the opportunity to present a case to a judge. This process is referred to as expedited removal. If a non-citizen claims to fear harm or persecution in their home country, they should be afforded a "credible fear interview" and if they pass the interview, should be permitted to seek asylum before an immigration judge.
I-94 Card	The I-94 is often referred to as a non-citizen's "entry/admission record." Historically, it was a small index-card sized piece of paper that was placed in the passport of a noncitizen entering the U.S. Now, CBP typically issues electronic I-94 records (searchable and downloadable from the CBP website). The I-94 provides the identifying number, name, date of birth, and country of nationality of its holder. It also dictates the non-citizen's period of authorized stay in the U.S., and is considered the primary and controlling proof of lawful admission into the country. DHS may also issue I-94s in other circumstances to acknowledge an individual's lawful immigration status.
ICE Check-in	If a non-citizen was apprehended and later released from immigration custody, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) may require them to attend regular check-in appointments to promote and ensure their compliance with ongoing civil immigration removal proceedings. Attendance at ICE check-ins is a common "alternative to detention." At ICE check-in

	appointments, the noncitizen reports to an ICE officer and provides an update on their case and status in the country. ICE check-ins are mandatory unless the individual has received official confirmation of a cancellation or reschedule.
Individual Merits Hearing	During an individual merits hearing, a noncitizen presents a defense to removal, and explains to an immigration judge why they should be permitted to remain in the U.S. The application that a noncitizen may present and defend at an individual merits hearing may include asylum, withholding of removal, cancellation of removal, or adjustment of status. An immigration judges issues a decision on whether the individual will be granted relief and allowed to remain in the U.S. If neither party appeals the decision within 30 days, the immigration judge's decision becomes final.
Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)	Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is a subagency of the Department of Homeland Security. Its responsibilities include apprehension, detention, and removal of noncitizens.
Immigration Court	An administrative court responsible for adjudicating immigration cases for individuals in removal proceedings. Cases before the immigration court involve noncitizens who have been charged by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) with violating U.S. immigration law. Typically, an attorney for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) acts as a prosecutor representing the U.S. government in its charges against the noncitizen. Non-citizens have the right to their own attorney in removal proceedings before the immigration court, but the attorney is not provided at government expense. The court is part of the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), which is within the Department of Justice. Appeals of Immigration Judge decisions can be made to the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA), which is also part of EOIR. Some BIA decisions can be appealed further, to the federal courts.
Immigration Judge	An administrative judge presiding over hearings in the Immigration Court (part of the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), which is a subagency of the U.S. Department of Justice). Immigration Judges determine whether a noncitizen should be granted relief (allowed to remain in the U.S., and in what status), and/or whether a noncitizen is eligible for or deserving of bond.
Master Calendar Hearing (MCH)	A Master Calendar Hearing (MCH) is an initial hearing before an immigration judge. At an MCH, the immigration judge will review the charges that ICE has made against the individual in the "Notice to Appear," such as that they are in the country unlawfully or overstayed a visa. The judge will ask the noncitizen to respond to the charges in the Notice to Appear, and present any applications for relief or defenses to removal. During the MCH, a noncitizen should be informed of their legal rights and responsibilities in immigration proceedings. After a noncitizen submits an application for relief, the immigration judge will schedule a hearing to consider the noncitizen's claim for relief ("individual hearing" or "merits hearing"), and may provide deadlines to submit applications or evidence
Notice to Appear	The Notice to Appear ("NTA") is a document prepared by DHS to initiate civil removal proceedings against a noncitizen. The document alleges the factual basis why DHS believes the noncitizen is removable, including allegations that the noncitizen has violated certain immigration laws, as well as the legal basis under which the noncitizen should be subject to removal. This document must be properly delivered ("served") on the non-citizen, but removal proceedings are not officially commenced unless and until DHS serves the NTA on the Immigration Court.
Office Refugee Resettlement (ORR)	An office within the Administration for Children and Families in the Health and Human Services Department. This office has the responsibility among other things for administering government benefits to certain eligible populations (including refugees, trafficking survivors, and certain parolees). It also supervises unaccompanied minors in detention.
Order of Supervision	A special type of order which permits the release of an individual even after they have been issued a final order of removal by an immigration judge. Typically, individuals subject to an order of supervision must report to ICE on a regular basis. They are often vulnerable to being detained and subject to removal at the whim of DHS.

Parole	Permission granted to an noncitizen to enter the United States notwithstanding the fact that they might not otherwise have permission to enter. A person paroled is known as a "parolee." Parolees are given temporary status, and when that designated time expires, they may need to leave the U.S., or they could be subject to immigration enforcement or removal.
Persecution	A type of harm that is central to applications for asylum. The term is not defined in the U.S. asylum statute. However, it has been defined by U.S. courts to mean "a threat to the life or freedom of, or the infliction of suffering or harm upon, those who differ in a way regarded as offensive." Generally, persecution must be more than "mere harassment." It often encompasses severe forms of harm as torture, sexual assault, severe physical beatings, and death threats may constitute persecution. Whether harm rises to the level of "persecution" is a question that should be decided on a case-by-case basis. To prevail on their applications, asylum-seekers are generally required to prove that they have a "well-founded" fear of persecution if they are forced to return to their home country. This means that the asylum seeker's fear is both subjectively genuine and objectively reasonable given the circumstances and context of the country.
Pretermission of Asylum Applications	In April 2025, the Acting Director of EOIR issued a Policy Memorandum, PM 25-28,17, encouraging immigration judges to “pretermit” asylum applications in immigration court if the application is perceived as legally deficient, or otherwise does not present a clear claim. If an immigration judge pretermits an asylum application, they essentially reject the application and can order the individual removed without a hearing.
Port of Entry	Any location in the U.S. or its territories that is designated as a point of entry for noncitizens and U.S. citizens. For example, highways at the point they cross the border from Mexico or Canada and international airports are ports of entry. They are administered by Customs and Border Protection of the Department of Homeland Security. At the present time, there are about 300 ports of entry.
Refugee	A person who is outside his or her country of nationality and who is unable or unwilling to return to that country due to past persecution or a "well-founded" fear of (future) persecution in that country. The past or feared future persecution must be due to the applicant's race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. This legal standard is the same one that is applied to applicants for asylum. However, whereas an asylum applicant applies for his/her status while in the U.S., a refugee applies when they are located abroad, usually in a third country. The number of refugees who are "resettled" in the U.S. is subject to annual numerical ceilings, as well as country of origin limitations set by the President, in consultation with Congress. A refugee is granted the right to live and work in the U.S. They must apply for lawful permanent resident status after one year in the U.S.
Removal	The expulsion of a person from the U.S. who is not a U.S. citizen. The more common term for this is "deportation." The process often involves a hearing before an Immigration Judge who also may determine whether any exceptions to deportation should be applied. See also "Expedited Removal," above.
Removal Hearing	A court hearing to determine whether certain noncitizens are subject to removal (deportation) from the U.S. The hearings are administered by the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), also known as the Immigration Court, and presided over by an Immigration Judge. EOIR is part of the Department of Justice. To initiate removal proceedings, the Department of Homeland Security prepares a document known as a Notice to Appear which alleges that a the noncitizen has violated certain immigration laws and should be removed (deported) from the U.S. as a result. DHS must deliver ("serve") this document to the noncitizen and file it with the Immigration Court. The filing of this document commences removal proceedings against the individual.

Resettlement	Permanent relocation of refugees to a country other than their country of origin or last habitual residence, to provide protection from danger of persecution should they be forced to return there. Generally, "receiving countries" verify the identity and risks of persecution of refugees, to the extent possible, before approving their resettlement within their borders. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, with the cooperation of non-government organizations, oversees international resettlement programs. The United States has historically resettled more refugees each year than any other country in the world. However, in January 2025, the administration suspended the admission of refugees, and very few refugees have been admitted since that suspension.
Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS)	Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) is a pathway for undocumented immigrant children who have been abused, neglected, or abandoned by one or both of their biological parents to gain legal permanent residency in the U.S. and potentially citizenship. The juvenile must have been declared, by an appropriate local juvenile or family court, to be "dependent" on the court or a state, due to abuse, neglect, or abandonment. Other legal requirements also must be met. The first step of the process involves the juvenile or state court and the second entails review and a determination by USCIS and DHS.
Temporary Protected Status (TPS)	A temporary status granted to nationals of particular countries who have been residing in the U.S. since a particular cut-off date to allow them to temporarily to remain in the U.S. The Secretary of DHS, in consultation with the Secretary of State, will designate a specific country for TPS if the conditions in that country as such that it would be dangerous or impracticable for their citizens presently in the U.S. to return there. Common conditions underlying the designation of TPS include ongoing armed conflict within the country; environmental disasters such as an earthquake, flood, drought, or epidemic; and other "extraordinary" conditions which prevent the safe return of nationals. Individuals eligible for TPS are typically granted protection for short-term periods between 6 to 18 months; this status can be extended if DHS extends or re-designates the country for TPS. Individuals granted TPS can apply for and receive employment authorization and have historically been shielded from immigration enforcement/removal while they hold valid TPS status. TPS was created by the Immigration Act of 1990. Since its inception, TPS-designated countries have included Angola, Burundi, Bosnia-Herzegovina, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Sudan.
Undocumented Immigrant	A person who is not a citizen of the U.S. and who does not have lawful immigration status in the U.S. Most undocumented immigrants entered the U.S. "without inspection" (i.e., they did not enter the U.S. at a designated port of entry with valid documents) or they were "inspected and admitted" with a valid visa/status but violated or overstayed the terms of that visa/status.
Voluntary Departure	An order generally given by an immigration judge to leave the country within a given period of time. If the person complies, then there may be no legal bar imposed as there is with removal for returning to the U.S. If the person does not leave before the relevant date, the order turns into an order of removal.

Data and definitions pulled from: American Immigration Council, Freedom for Immigrants, The National Immigration Project, The National Immigration Forum, NYCBar and TRAC Immigration,