May 27, 2021

The Honorable Merrick B. Garland
Attorney General of the United States
U.S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20530-0001

The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas
Secretary of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528


Dear Attorney General Garland and Secretary Mayorkas:

As your agencies conduct a “comprehensive examination of current rules, regulations, precedential decisions, and internal guidelines governing the adjudication of asylum claims . . . to evaluate whether the United States provides protection . . . consistent with international standards,” we wish to express our views—as immigration law scholars—on the proper construction and application of the state protection element of the refugee definition.

For decades, immigration adjudicators and U.S. courts have recognized that a refugee can be one fleeing state-perpetrated persecution or nonstate persecution from which the state is either “unable or unwilling” to provide effective protection. This unable-or-unwilling nonstate actor test has been adopted and applied by every U.S. court of appeals in the country that reviews these decisions. However, where to situate that test in the Refugee definition and how to measure the efficacy of state protection have been far more elusive. We contend that the longstanding unable-or-unwilling standard should be anchored in the text of the Refugee Act that defines a refugee as one who is “unable or unwilling to avail . . . of [state] protection . . . because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution.” Gauging the effectiveness of state protection by the extent to which a state has prevented past persecution or can reduce the risk of future persecution below the well-founded fear threshold is an approach both faithful to the will of Congress and vital to providing clarity for adjudicators evaluating nonstate persecutor claims.

In contrast to the approach we advance, the previous administration departed from the unable-or-unwilling standard by requiring applicants to demonstrate that their governments “condoned” their...
persecution or were “completely helpless” to stop it.\textsuperscript{6} In \textit{Matter of A-B-}, the former Attorney General recognized the dramatic winnowing effect that his condone-or-completely-helpless test would entail, writing that “[g]enerally,” claims based upon harms “perpetrated by non-governmental actors \textit{will not qualify for asylum}.”\textsuperscript{7} Not only does that heightened nonstate actor test find no support in the existing statutes, regulations, or former agency precedent, it has sown considerable confusion within the courts of appeals.\textsuperscript{8} It has also markedly narrowed the pathway for bona fide refugees fleeing nonstate persecution in a manner irreconcilable with the plain language of the Refugee Act or international legal standards.

\section{I. The Regulations Should Properly Situate the State Protection Element in the Relevant Statutory Text.}

To both address the heightened nonstate actor problem and provide critical guidance to adjudicators and courts evaluating nonstate persecutor claims moving forward, we collectively urge the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security to promulgate regulations that closely and carefully adhere to the intent and plain language of the Refugee Act. Specifically, we maintain that the nonstate actor test must be anchored in the explicit terms of the Refugee Act and Refugee Convention that define a refugee in relevant part as one who is “unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of [his or her country of nationality] because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution.”\textsuperscript{9} There are at least three conclusions to be drawn from that statutory language: (1) Congress intended for relief to be available for applicants who are fleeing nonstate persecutors; (2) the statute does not permit an applicant to be denied relief for being “unwilling” to seek state protection; and (3) the effectiveness of state protection must be measured against the neighboring statutory provisions related to past harm and a well-founded fear of future harm.

First, the unadorned language of the Refugee Act is sufficiently capacious to encompass both harms inflicted by state actors as well as nonstate actors. To be able to \textit{avail} of state protection, such protection must be \textit{available}. Where the state is the source of persecution, such protection is obviously \textit{unavailable} and an applicant for asylum would be reasonable in being \textit{unwilling} to seek state protection. Similarly, where the state lacks the capacity or desire to provide meaningful and effective protection vis-à-vis a nonstate persecutor, such protection is \textit{unavailable} and thus a refugee would be \textit{unable} to avail of it. The statute contains nothing to suggest that refugees fleeing nonstate persecution are somehow less worthy of relief relative to those fleeing state persecution.

Second, the refugee definition clearly includes those who are simply “\textit{unwilling to avail} [themselves] of [state] protection.”\textsuperscript{10} The statute leaves absolutely no room to penalize or otherwise disadvantage a refugee who flees his or her country without first seeking the help of the police or other

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\item[\textsuperscript{6}] \textit{Matter of A-B-}, 27 I&N Dec. 316 (A.G. 2018); \textit{Matter of A-B-}, 28 I&N Dec. 199 (A.G. 2021). If the Biden administration wishes to secure the traditional nonstate actor test against future changes similar to those advanced by the Trump administration, it should ground the test in the more explicit state protection language the statute employs. \textit{Ellison \\& Gupta, supra} note 2 at 505-506, 511-15.
\item[\textsuperscript{7}] \textit{Matter of A-B-}, 27 I&N Dec. at 320 (emphasis added).
\item[\textsuperscript{8}] \textit{Ellison \\& Gupta, supra} note 2 at 494-503.
\item[\textsuperscript{9}] 8 U.S.C. 1101(a)(42) (emphasis added). The Refugee Convention similarly defines a refugee as one who “owing to [a] well founded fear of being persecuted . . . is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country,”\textsuperscript{11} Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, art. 1, July 28, 1951, 19 U.S.T. 6259 (entered into force Apr. 22, 1954) (emphasis added).
\item[\textsuperscript{10}] \textit{Id.} (emphasis added).
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authorities. Case law by the agency and courts of appeals has recognized that there may be many reasonable bases for not seeking state protection prior to fleeing one’s country. Provided that the choice not to seek protection is rooted in an experience of past persecution or a well-founded fear of future persecution, the statute does not contemplate additional hurdles for refugees who are unwilling to avail themselves of state protection.

Third, the text of the statute provides a guide for gauging how ineffective state protection must be for a refugee to be reasonably unable or unwilling to avail of that protection. The statutory reference to being “unable or unwilling to avail . . . of [state] protection” in § 1101(a)(42)(A) is explicitly linked to the existence of past persecution or a “well-founded fear” of future persecution. Thus, the statute must be construed consistently with those neighboring elements of the refugee definition. Requisite state protection must be measured by the extent to which the refugee-producing country was able and willing to protect an applicant from past persecution or would be able and willing to provide sufficient protection such that the risk of future persecution falls below the well-founded fear threshold. In the absence of past persecution (where a well-founded fear is presumed), the Supreme Court has held that an applicant possesses a well-founded fear even if there is “only a 10% chance of being . . . persecuted.” Thus, the nonstate actor test should be satisfied where a state lacks the will or ability to protect an applicant from a nonstate actor in a way that reduces the applicant’s probability of future harm below that 10% chance. In this way, the well-founded fear analysis serves as the lodestar for nonstate actor determinations based upon a fear of future harm. Any interpretation or construction of the state protection requirement that is untethered to considerations of past persecution or a well-founded fear simply cannot be squared with the statute.

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11 An applicant is not required to “seek[] government assistance when doing so (1) ‘would have been futile’ or (2) ‘would have subjected [him] to further abuse.’ Orellana v. Barr, 925 F.3d 145, 153 (4th Cir. 2019); Matter of S-A, 22 I&N Dec. 1328, 1335 (BIA 2000) (finding the nonstate actor test satisfied even though applicant “did not request protection from the government”). In Bringas-Rodriguez v. Sessions, 850 F.3d 1051 (9th Cir. 2017), the en banc court explained that reporting is not necessary where: (1) “a country’s laws or customs effectively deprive the petitioner of any meaningful recourse to governmental protection;” (2) “[p]rior interactions with authorities” reveal governmental inability or unwillingness to protect; (3) “others have made reports of similar instances to no avail;” (4) “private persecution of a particular sort is widespread and well-known, but not controlled by the government;” or (5) reporting “would have been futile or would have subjected the applicant to further abuse.”

12 See supra note 11. While those who do not seek state protection are, of course, unable to point to the police’s reaction to their complaint as evidence in support of their claim, that cannot be dispositive. See Bringas-Rodriguez, 850 F.3d at 1072. At times, reporting will place the applicant in grave danger, or their lived experience (or that of similarly situated individuals) may reveal that reporting would be futile. In either case, there can be no penalty for simply being “unwilling to avail . . . of state protection” consistent with the statute. Id. This conclusion aligns with the original intent of the Refugee Convention’s drafters. See Andrew Paul Janco, “Unwilling: The One-Word Revolution in Refugee Status,” 1940-51, 23 Contemp.Eur.Hist. 429-446, 440 (2014) (tracing the historical development behind the phrase “unwilling to avail,” showing that “the original intent of the word ‘unwilling’ was to emphasize that it was the individual who refused to return home and refused state protection,” and demonstrating that such individuals were explicitly included within the refugee definition).

13 Ellison & Gupta, supra note 2 at 511-519; Deborah E. Anker, Law of Asylum in the United States § 4:8.


15 The Board’s interpretation of the well-founded fear test provides further support for this framing. The Board has held that to establish a well-founded fear, an applicant must show, inter alia, that their feared persecutor is both able to harm them and inclined to harm them. Matter of Mogharrabi, 19 I&N Dec. 439, 446 (B.I.A. 1987). In the context of nonstate persecutors, the question of whether a feared persecutor is able to harm necessarily turns upon the degree to which the state has both the will and capacity to protect.
II. The Regulations Should Measure the Effectiveness of State Protection through the Lens of Well-founded Fear.

Faithful adherence to the relevant statutory language for which we advocate would solve the problems of confusion and past problematic constructions regarding the state protection element. Conversely, grounding the nonstate actor test in the term persecution provides no clarity on the level, nature, or quality of effectiveness of state protection to be expected. Instead, the term persecution is almost universally recognized as an ambiguous term that relates to whether past or feared harm is sufficiently severe. Conflating these elements has already resulted in confusion in the courts of appeals and will only persist unless clarity is provided. Anchoring the state protection analysis instead in the relevant terms of the statute that actually speak of the availability of state protection is more faithful to congressional intent and provides more guidance to adjudicators. When properly framed, requisite state protection is measured by whether the applicant has suffered past persecution from a nonstate actor (and thus the state failed to protect) or whether the applicant possesses a well-founded fear of future harm that the state is either unable or unwilling to prevent. In either case, state protection was not (or is) not available.

Understanding the state protection element consistently with the well-founded fear analysis is likewise consistent with international legal standards. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)—in its Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status—provides that refugees fleeing nonstate persecution should be granted protection where the authorities are unwilling or unable “to offer effective protection.” International law scholars have explained that the “only criterion . . . [for such determinations] is whether the person will be subject to substantial risk of harm from the non-state actor. If there is such a risk, the human rights treaty

16 Ellison & Gupta, supra note 2 at 506.
17 See, e.g., Nelson v. INS, 232 F.3d 258, 263 (1st Cir. 2000) (“To qualify as persecution,” a person’s experienced harm must be sufficiently severe); Beskovic v. Gonzalez, 467 F.3d 223, 226 (2d. Cir. 2006) (finding that a “minor beating . . . may rise to the level of persecution” under certain circumstances); Gomez-Zulaga v. U.S. Att’y Gen., 527 F.3d 330, 342 (3d Cir. 2008) (providing guidance on what harms “rise to the level of ‘persecution’”); Li v. Gonzalez, 405 F.3d 171, 178 (4th Cir. 2005) (discussing when “economic penalties rise to the level of persecution”); Munoz-Granados v. Barr, 958 F.3d 402, 407 (5th Cir. 2020) (discussing when threats “rise to the level of ‘persecution’”); Mikhailovitch v. INS, 146 F.3d 384, 389–90 (6th Cir. 1998) (providing examples of harms that do not “rise to the level of ‘persecution’”); Stanokova v. Holder, 645 F.3d 943, 947–48 (7th Cir. 2011) (stating that, to constitute “persecution,” the harm must be more severe than discrimination or harassment); Ahmed v. Ashcroft, 396 F.3d 1011, 1014 (8th Cir. 2007) (“Economic discrimination” can “rise to the level of persecution” under certain conditions); Ahmed v. Keisler, 504 F.3d 1183, 1194 (9th Cir. 2007) (stating that whether harm constitutes “persecution” depends upon their cumulative effect); Wijaksana v. Holder, 573 F.3d 968, 977 (10th Cir. 2009) (discussing when assault rises to the level of persecution); Mejia v. U.S. Att’y Gen., 498 F.3d 1252, 1258 (11th Cir. 2007) (considering whether the “cumulative effects of the escalating threats and attacks” constitutes “persecution.”).
18 Ellison & Gupta, supra note 2 at 494-503, 516.
20 Id. (defining a refugee as one who is “unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of . . . [state] protection . . . because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution.”) (emphasis added).
21 Id.
22 The Supreme Court has explained that “the legislative history of the new definition of ‘refugee,’ and indeed the entire 1980 Act,” clearly reveals that “Congress’ primary purpose was to bring United States refugee law into conformance with the 1967 United Nations Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees . . . to which the United States acceded in 1968,” INS v. Cardoza-Fonseca, 480 U.S. at 436-37.
obligation... should prevent... a state from sending individuals into harm's way.”24 The availability of state protection is “an integral part of the... determination that a well-founded fear of persecution exists,” but it should not be elevated above, or to the exclusion of, the probability of harm analysis.25

III. The Regulatory Burden-Shifting Framework Should Be Adjusted to Encompass the State Protection Requirement.

Based upon the foregoing observations related to the text, structure, and international legal interpretations of the state protection element, we believe that the burden-shifting framework in the asylum and withholding of removal regulations should be adjusted to provide that once an applicant has shown past persecution, the burden shifts to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to demonstrate that the state would be willing and able to stop that persecution in the future. Existing regulations provide that a refugee is able to satisfy the threshold substantive eligibility requirements for asylum by establishing that “he or she has suffered persecution in the past in the applicant's country of nationality... on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.”26 Where past persecution has been established, the applicant “shall also be presumed to have a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of the original claim.”27

Given that the statutory structure tethers the well-founded fear and state protection analyses, we believe that the new regulations should make clear that the presumption of well-founded fear should include the nonstate actor element, particularly because, if an applicant was persecuted by a nonstate actor in the past, the state clearly failed to protect that applicant. And, consistent with the existing regulatory burden-shifting scheme, the new regulations should similarly provide that DHS could rebut the presumption of well-founded fear by showing (1) that there has been a “fundamental change in circumstances”; (2) that there is a reasonable “internal relocation” option; or (3) that the state is able and willing to provide effective protection.28 In that event, the applicant would have to demonstrate eligibility for humanitarian asylum to be granted relief.29 Where there is an absence of past persecution, an applicant would need to independently demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution, including showing that there is insufficient state protection to reduce the probability of future harm below the well-founded fear threshold (i.e., 10% chance of future persecution). Such an approach would provide a “symmetrical and coherent regulatory scheme” that would “fit... all [statutory and regulatory] parts into a harmonious whole.”30 This proposed burden assignment would also be consonant with the existing regulatory scheme and thus would not unduly burden DHS, given the factual similarly between showing changed country conditions and internal relocation on the one hand, and available state protection on the other.

24 Andrew Clapham, Human Rights Obligations of Non-State Actors 335–41 (Grainne de Burca et al. eds 2006); see also Guy S. Goodwin-Gill & Jane McAdam, The Refugee in International Law 10 (Oxford Univ. Press 3rd ed. 2007).
25 Guy S. Goodwin-Gill & Jane McAdam, supra note 24 at 23.
26 8 C.F.R. § 1208.13(b)(1).
27 Id.
28 See id.
29 8 C.F.R. § 1208.13(b)(1)(ii).
IV. The Regulations Should Recognize there is No Requirement to Seek State Protection.

Next, we believe that the new regulations should provide that a refugee must not to be penalized for failing to seek state protection where that decision was grounded upon an experience of past persecution or a well-founded fear of future persecution. For examples, in *Bringas-Rodriguez v. Sessions*, the applicant—as a mere child—had been regularly beaten, raped, and sexually assaulted by two family members and a neighbor on account of their perception that he was gay.31 Additionally, his “abusers[] threatened” further harm “if he ever reported[] fearing that they would follow through on their threats, Bringas did not” seek the protection of the police.32 Despite his being just fourteen years old when he fled his country and his credible testimony that similarly situated individuals were persecuted by the police upon reporting, the BIA affirmed the IJ’s decision denying relief for failure to satisfy the nonstate actor requirement.33 A divided three-judge panel affirmed, reasoning that Mr. Bringas’ failure to report left a “gap in proof about how the government would have responded” had he reported the abuse.34 The en banc court reversed, correctly recognizing that there is no per se reporting requirement and that it was wrong to impose any “gap-filling proof requirement.”35

In gauging the reasonableness of an applicant’s decision to not report where he or she fears future harm, the regulations should codify what many courts, and the BIA, have recognized: reporting cannot be required, particularly where it places the refugee at risk of harm or would be futile to do so.36 Such clarity around reporting, along with the other recommendations made in this letter, would ensure that asylum-seekers like Mr. Bringas would not be errantly denied protection in the future. There is no doubt that Mexico failed him and that the harms he suffered should be treated as “persecution.” But the existing framework placed a near impossible burden for protection on him, and he only prevailed because the circuit court took the relatively rare step of agreeing to hear his case en banc.

V. The Regulations Should Explicitly Reject the Condone-or-Completely-Helpless Standard.

Finally, the new regulations should state explicitly both that the correct standard for assessing state protection is the familiar unwilling-or-unable standard, and that neither party is required to demonstrate whether the refugee-producing country “condoned” or was “completely helpless” to stop the persecution. Understanding the state protection analysis consistently with the Refugee Act and its well-founded fear component removes any possibility for the imposition of a condone-or-completely helpless standard. This point can be saliently demonstrated by looking at a recent

31 850 F.3d at 1056-57.
32 Id.
33 Id. at 1057.
34 Id. at 1058.
35 Id. at 1065-66, 1072.
36 See supra note 11-12.
example. In *Jimenez-Galloso*, where the applicant had experienced years of domestic violence, rape and credible death threats from her spouse, the IJ had concluded that that applicant “easily met her [withholding] burden” because she was facing a greater than fifty percent probability of being murdered by her husband in Mexico. However, the IJ denied relief (and the BIA affirmed) in part because she said she would not seek state protection and because the government was not “completely helpless” to protect Ms. Jimenez Galloso. Even though it was undisputed that she had surpassed her withholding of removal burden (and therefore easily had surpassed the well-founded fear threshold), the agency denied her relief under a nonstate actor standard entirely unmoored from the statute. Indeed, any interpretation of the nonstate actor element that renders superfluous the well-founded fear element (as elaborated by *Cardoza-Fonseca*)—or that requires reporting—must be rejected. Ms. Jimenez Galloso’s case (and many more like hers) represent sad and sobering examples of how the “complete helplessness” standard—or any approach that views the nonstate actor standard in isolation from its statutory context—will lead to tragic results.

Moreover, despite the clear difference in the meanings of the words “condone” and “unwilling,” and of the words “completely helpless” and “unable,” and despite the real impact of the heightened standard, in the wake of *Matter of A-B*, the courts of appeals have disagreed as to whether the two standards differ and whether the heightened standard is permissible. Simply stating in the regulations that the unwilling-or-unable standard applies may not be sufficient, as some courts have found the two standards to be “interchangeable.” Thus, the new regulations should explicitly reject the condone-or-completely-helpless standard.

* * *

Instead of the misguided approach of the past to view the nonstate actor standard divorced of its context and its explicit statutory connection to well-founded fear (whether presumed or actual), we write to urge you to ground the longstanding nonstate actor unable-or-unwilling standard in the relevant text of the Refugee Act. The statutory terms, which defines a refugee as one who is “unable

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38 *Id.*

39 *Id.* While the record demonstrated that the Mexican government was utterly ineffective in providing protection, because they were making some efforts to protect, the agency did not deem the country to be completely helpless.

40 It should be beyond dispute that the well-founded fear and nonstate actor elements of the refugee definition must be understood consistently with one another. *See Yates v. United States*, 135 S. Ct. 1074, 1085 (2015). Yet, if complete state helplessness carries the ordinary meaning those words suggest, then theoretically even a refugee facing a 90% probability of harm (in a country where the state protects just 10% of victims) could be denied asylum under that heightened standard because the state is not completely helpless. Such a complete helplessness rule nullifies the 10% probability of harm analysis where the feared persecutor is a nonstate actor. As such, that construction must be rejected. *Id.*

41 Ellison & Gupta, supra note 2 at 509-10 (finding that petitioners in one circuit “succeeded at more than twice the rate when the lower unable-or-unwilling standard was cited” as compared with the condone-or-complete-helplessness test).

42 *Id.* at 494-503.

43 *See e.g.*, Scarlett v. Barr, 957 F.3d 316, 333 (2d Cir. 2020); Gonçalves-Veláz v. Barr, 938 F.3d 219, 233 (5th Cir. 2019); Galaz Figueroa v. Att’y Gen., 2021 WL 1991889, at *6 (3d Cir. May 19, 2021).

44 8 C.F.R. § 1208.13(b)(1) (well-founded fear is presumed when an applicant establishes past persecution).

45 8 C.F.R. § 1208.13(b)(2) (an applicant may independently establish a well-founded fear even in the absence of past persecution).
or unwilling to avail . . . of [state] protection . . . because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution”46 provide clarity that is currently lacking for measuring effective state protection. The new regulations should provide that, once an applicant establishes past persecution, the burden shifts to DHS to show that the state is willing and able to stop the persecution. The regulations should make clear that there is no penalty for refugees who reasonably elect not to seek state protection. Finally, the regulations should explicitly provide that applicants are not required to establish that their government “condones” or is “completely helpless” to stop their persecution.47 Making the regulatory changes proposed above are consistent with the statute, the existing regulatory scheme with regard to burdens of proof, and international legal principles. Thank you for your attention to this matter of grave importance to countless refugees.

Should you have any questions, please contact Professor Shane Ellison at elli@law.duke.edu or Professor Anjum Gupta at anjum.gupta@rutgers.edu.

Signed,48

______________________________  ____________________________
Charles Shane Ellison, Senior Lecturing Fellow Anju Gupta, Professor of Law &
Duke University School of Law Judge Chester J. Straub Scholar

Susan M. Akram
Clinical Professor and Director
International Human Rights Clinic
Boston University School of Law

Raquel E. Aldana
Professor of Law
UC Davis School of Law

Heather Axford
Adjunct Professor of Law
New York Law School

David C. Baluarte
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs
Associate Clinical Professor of Law
W&L School of Law

47 Cf. Matter of A-B-, 27 I&N Dec. 316 (A.G. 2018); Matter of A-B-, 28 I&N Dec. 199 (A.G. 2021). Such an explicit regulatory statement here is critical given that several courts of appeal have found—incorrectly in our view—that there is an equivalency between the two standards. See supra note 41-43.
48 Signatories are listed in their individual capacities. Institutional affiliations are listed for identification purposes only.
Jon Bauer
Clinical Professor of Law and Richard D. Tulisano '69 Scholar in Human Rights
University of Connecticut School of Law

Lenni B. Benson
Distinguished Professor of Immigration and Human Rights Law
Founder Safe Passage Project Clinic
New York Law School

Kaci Bishop
Clinical Professor of Law
University of North Carolina School of Law

Blaine Bookey
Legal Director
Center for Gender & Refugee Studies
University of California Hastings College of the Law

Linda Bosniak
Distinguished Professor of Law
Rutgers Law School

Richard A. Boswell
Professor of Law
University of California Hastings College of the Law

Stacy Caplow
Professor of Law, Associate Dean of Experiential Education
Brooklyn Law School

Benjamin Casper Sanchez
Associate Clinical Professor and Faculty Director
James H. Binger Center for New Americans
University of Minnesota Law School

Michael J. Churgin
Raybourne Thompson Centennial Professor in Law
University of Texas at Austin

Marisa S. Cianciarulo
Doy & Dee Henley Chair in Law, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs
Chapman University Fowler School of Law

Dree K. Collopy
Co-director, Immigration Litigation Clinic
The Catholic University of America Columbus School of Law
Rose Cuison-Villazor  
Vice Dean, Professor of Law and Chancellor's Social Justice Scholar  
Director, Center for Immigration Law, Policy and Justice  
Rutgers Law School

Kate Evans  
Clinical Professor of Law  
Duke University School of Law

Richard H. Frankel  
Professor of Law, Director, Federal Litigation and Appeals Clinic  
Drexel University, Thomas R. Kline School of Law

Niels W. Frenzen  
Sydney M. and Audrey M. Irmas Endowed Clinical Professor of Law  
Co-Director, USC Immigration Clinic  
USC Gould School of Law

Maryellen Fullerton  
Suzanne J. and Norman Miles Professor of Law  
Brooklyn Law School

Paula Galowitz  
Clinical Professor of Law Emerita  
New York University School of Law

Denise Gilman  
Clinical Professor & Co-Director, Immigration Clinic  
University of Texas School of Law

Valeria Gomez  
William R. Davis Clinical Teaching Fellow  
University of Connecticut School of Law

Joanne Gottesman  
Clinical Professor of Law  
Director, Clinical Programs  
Director, Immigrant Justice Clinic  
Rutgers Law School

Anastacia Greene  
Immigration Clinical Fellow, Virgil Hawkins Civil Clinics  
University of Florida Levin College of Law

Susan Gzesh  
Senior Instructional Professor  
University of Chicago
Lindsay M. Harris  
Associate Professor of Law  
Director, Immigration & Human Rights Clinic  
University of the District of Columbia, David A. Clarke School of Law

Susan V. Hazeldean  
Associate Professor of Law  
Director, LGBT Advocacy Clinic  
Brooklyn Law School

Geoffrey Heeren  
Associate Professor and Director of the Immigration Clinic  
University of Idaho College of Law

Geoffrey Hoffman  
Clinical Professor, Immigration Clinic Director  
University of Houston Law Center

Mary Holper  
Associate Clinical Professor  
Boston College Law School

Alan Hyde  
Distinguished Professor and Sidney Reitman Scholar  
Rutgers Law School

Erin Jacobsen  
Professor of Law/ Senior Staff Attorney  
Vermont Law School

Kate Jastram  
Director of Policy & Advocacy  
Center for Gender & Refugee Studies  
University of California Hastings College of the Law, Lecturer, Berkeley Law

Kevin Johnson  
Dean and Mabie-Apallas Professor of Public Interest Law and Chicana/o Studies  
UC Davis School of Law

Elizabeth Keyes  
Associate Professor  
University of Baltimore School of Law

Frances Miriam Kreimer  
Visiting Assistant Professor & Director  
Clinic for Asylum, Refugee and Emigrant Services  
Villanova University Charles Widger School of Law
Tally Kritzman-Amir  
Visiting Assistant Professor  
Boston University School of Law

Charles H. Kuck  
Adjunct Professor of Law  
Emory Law School

Hiroko Kusuda  
Clinic Professor  
Loyola University New Orleans College of Law

Eunice C. Lee  
Associate Professor of Law  
University of Arizona  
James E. Rogers College of Law

Stephen Legomsky  
John S. Lehmann University Professor Emeritus  
Washington University

Laura Lunn  
Adjunct Professor of Law  
University of Denver, Sturm College of Law

Beth Lyon  
Clinical Professor of Law  
Associate Dean for Experiential Education  
Clinical Program Director  
Cornell Law School

Randi Mandelbaum  
Distinguished Clinical Professor of Law  
Annamay Sheppard Scholar, and Director  
Child Advocacy Clinic  
Rutgers Law School

Lynn Marcus  
Clinical Law Professor  
University of Arizona James E. Rogers College of Law

Sheila I Vélez Martínez  
Jack and Lovell Olender Professor of Asylum Refugee and Immigration Law  
University of Pittsburgh School of Law
Miriam H. Marton
Associate Dean for Experiential Learning
Director Tulsa Immigrant Resource Network
Associate Clinical Professor of Law
University of Tulsa College of Law

Elizabeth McCormick
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs & Associate Clinical Professor of Law
University of Tulsa College of Law

Amelia S. McGowan
Adjunct Professor of Law, Immigration Clinic
Mississippi College School of Law

M. Isabel Medina
Ferris Distinguished Professor of Law
Loyola University New Orleans College of Law

Stephen Meili
Associate Professor of Law and James H. Binger Professor in Clinical Law
University of Minnesota Law School

Katie Herbert Meyer
Asst. Prof. of Practice & Director, Immigration Law Clinic
Washington University

Eugenio Mollo, Jr.
Adjunct Professor
The University of Toledo College of Law

Jennifer Moore
Professor of Law and Pamela Minzner Chair in Professionalism
University of New Mexico School of Law

Karen Musalo
Bank of America Foundation Chair in International Law Professor & Director
Center for Gender & Refugee Studies
University of California Hastings College of the Law

Natalie Nanasi
Assistant Professor
Director, Hunter Legal Center for Victims of Crimes Against Women
SMU Dedman School of Law

Lori A. Nessel
Professor of Law
Director, Immigrants’ Rights/International Human Rights Clinic
Seton Hall University School of Law
Emily Torstveit Ngara  
Assistant Clinical Professor  
Georgia State University College of Law  

Mauricio E. Noroña  
Clinical Teaching Fellow  
Cardozo School of Law  

Michael A. Olivas  
Wm B. Bates Distinguished Chair in Law (Emeritus)  
University of Houston Law Center  

John Palmer  
Professor Agregat Interí  
Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona, Spain)  

Sarah H. Paoletti  
Practice Professor of Law  
Director, Transnational Legal Clinic  
University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School  

Reena Parikh  
Assistant Clinic Professor  
Boston College Law School  

Michele Pistone  
Professor of Law  
Villanova University  

Suzan M. Pritchett  
Professor of Law  
Director, Refugee Clinical Program  
Director of Clinics and Experiential Education  
Drake University  

Nina Rabin  
Director, Immigrant Family Legal Clinic  
UCLA School of Law  

Anam Rahman  
Adjunct Professor of Law  
Georgetown University Law Center  

Jaya Ramji-Nogales  
I. Herman Stern Research Professor  
Temple University, Beasley School of Law
Jane G. Rocamora  
Clinical Supervisor, Harvard Immigration and Refugee Clinic  
Harvard Law School

Katherine Aschenbrenner Rodriguez  
Associate Professor, Immigration Clinic  
Barry University School of Law

Sarah Rogerson  
Professor of Law  
Albany Law School

Victor C. Romero  
Maureen B. Cavanaugh Distinguished Faculty Scholar & Professor of Law  
Penn State Law

Hon. Lory D. Rosenberg (BIA ret.)  
Immigrant Defenders Law Group  
IDEAS Consultation and Coaching  
Empowering Immigration Attorneys

Kevin Ruser  
Richard and Margaret Larson Professor of Law  
M.S. Hevelone Professor of Law  
Director of Clinical Programs  
University of Nebraska College of Law

C. Mario Russell  
Adjunct Professor and Director of Immigrant and Refugee Services  
St. John’s Law School

Faiza W. Sayed  
Visiting Professor of Clinical Law  
Brooklyn Law School

Andrew I. Schoenholtz  
Professor from Practice  
Georgetown University Law Center

Erica B. Schommer  
Clinical Professor of Law  
St. Mary's University School of Law

Philip G. Schrag  
Delaney Family Professor of Public Interest Law  
Georgetown University School of Law
Rachel Settlage  
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs & Associate Professor  
Wayne State Law School  

Rebecca Sharpless  
Professor  
Director, Immigration Clinic  
University of Miami School of Law  

Jayashri Srikantiah  
Professor of Law  
Director, Immigrants' Rights Clinic  
Associate Dean of Clinical Education  
Stanford Law School  

Elissa Steglich  
Clinical Professor  
University of Texas School of Law  

Mark E. Steiner  
Professor of Law  
South Texas College of Law Houston  

Maureen A. Sweeney  
Law School Professor  
University of Maryland Carey School of Law  

David B. Thronson  
Alan S. Zekelman Professor of  
International Human Rights Law  
Director, Talsky Center for Human Rights of Women and Children  
Michigan State University College of Law  

Diane Uchimiya  
Director of Clinical Programs and Assistant Professor  
Connie Kearny Chair in Clinical Legal Education  
Creighton University School of Law  

Penny M. Venetis  
Director, International Human Rights Clinic  
Clinical Professor of Law  
Judge Dickinson R. Debevoise Scholar  
Rutgers Law School
Alex Vernon
Assistant Professor
Director, Immigration Law Clinic
University of Detroit Mercy School of Law

Shoba Sivaprasad Wadhia
Clinical Professor of Law & Director, Center for Immigrants’ Rights Clinic
Penn State Law

David P. Weber
Professor of Law
Creighton Law School

Deborah M. Weissman
Reef C. Ivey II Distinguished Professor of Law
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Law

Anna Welch
Clinical Professor of Law
University of Maine School of Law

Virgil Wiebe
Robins Kaplan Director of Clinical Education & Professor of Law
University of St. Thomas (Minnesota)

Stephen Wizner
William O. Douglas Clinical Professor Emeritus
Yale Law School

Lauris Wren
Clinical Professor of Law
Maurice A. Deane School of Law at Hofstra University

Stephen Yale-Loehr
Professor of Immigration Law Practice
Cornell Law School