IMMIGRATION CLINIC

2022 - 2023

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON LAW CENTER
Dear friends and colleagues,

I am honored and humbled to serve as Immigration Clinic Director and Professor of Practice this academic year. As we wrap up Fall 2022 and Spring 2023, I want to take a moment to reflect on the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. Our Clinic students and staff have accomplished. This year, our Clinic’s work was recognized by the City of Houston, resulting in our selection for the Mayor’s Community Engagement Volunteers Award.

Our goal is to prepare our students to be ethical, competent, and compassionate lawyers while providing access to justice to the immigrant community. Over the past year, our students have gained invaluable experience in interviewing and counseling clients, conducting legal research and writing, and handling a diverse range of immigration cases, including humanitarian-based immigration, family-based immigration, Citizenship and Naturalization, and litigation before the Immigration Court, the Board of Immigration Appeals, the United States District Court for the Southern District of Texas, and the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit.

We are proud of the variety of cases that we have handled, including asylum interviews for Afghans, defensive asylum merits hearings, T visas for trafficking victims, U visas for crime victims, Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) for Afghans, DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) renewals, requests for Prosecutorial Discretion (PD), Petitions for Alien Relative, Adjustment of Status Applications, Citizenship, and Naturalization. We also successfully handled federal litigation cases, including a Petition for a Writ of Mandamus before the U.S. Southern District of Texas, and Petitions for Review before the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals.

Community outreach is an important part of our work, and we participated in 120 outreach events. We participated in a new program with the U.S. Executive Office for Immigration Review’s Houston Immigration Court to provide pro se assistance for unrepresented individuals at their first removal hearing. Additionally, we partnered with RAICES (Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services) and created a Pro Se Habeas Corpus Toolkit to assist unrepresented individuals. In addition, we volunteered at Citizenship and Naturalization Forums with BakerRipley and Boat People SOS, and a Pro Se Asylum workshop with the YMCA International Services.

I would like to extend my gratitude to Christopher Heard, Thelma Baines, Lucas Aisenberg, and R. Parker Sheffy for their kindness, professionalism, hard work, and support. I would also like to thank my family, friends, and mentors for their continued love and support. Lastly, I want to thank our Clinic students for their dedication and hard work in serving the immigrant community. I am excited for the future of the Immigration Clinic and look forward to continuing our mission of providing access to justice and teaching students how to practice law ethically, competently, and compassionately.

Sincerely,

Teresa Messer
Immigration Clinic Director & Professor of Practice
University of Houston Law Center

We are proud to have hosted and organized our first ever immigration clinic mixer between all of Houston’s law schools, Thurgood Marshall School of Law, South Texas College of Law, and the University of Houston Law Center. The mixer was repeated in the Fall with sponsorship by the State Bar of Texas Immigration and Nationality Section, officially becoming a bi-annual event and inspiring similar mixers in Dallas and San Antonio during the Spring semester. In January 2023, we hosted our annual Joseph A. Vail Asylum Law Workshop, which had its highest attendance yet, with over 500 in person and virtual attendees. In April 2023, we hosted Human Trafficking 101: Understanding Trafficking of Children, with over 350 virtual attendees.

To enhance the clinical experience, we have made some improvements and additions, including transitioning to a paperless clinic, creating a databank of immigration case samples, checklists, practice advisories, and reference books, stationing a law librarian in the Clinic on a weekly basis, providing trainings on legal research and writing, mental health awareness and stress management, and bias and cultural competency.

I would like to extend my gratitude to Christopher Heard, Thelma Baines, Lucas Aisenberg, and R. Parker Sheffy for their kindness, professionalism, hard work, and support. I would also like to thank my family, friends, and mentors for their continued love and support. Lastly, I want to thank our Clinic students for their dedication and hard work in serving the immigrant community. I am excited for the future of the Immigration Clinic and look forward to continuing our mission of providing access to justice and teaching students how to practice law ethically, competently, and compassionately.

Sincerely,

Teresa Messer
Immigration Clinic Director & Professor of Practice
University of Houston Law Center
Instructors

Teresa Messer
Immigration Clinic Director and Professor of Practice

Lucas Aisenberg
Clinical Supervising Attorney

R. Parker Sheffy
Clinical Supervising Attorney

Class of Fall 2022

Class of Spring 2023
What’s Happening in the Immigration Clinic?

Immigration Clinic students, Alyssa Craze-Awbrey and Sai Gudapati, under the supervision of Immigration Clinic Director, Teresa Messer, and Clinical Supervising Attorney, Lucas Atsenberg, successfully advocated for their client at her asylum merits hearing.

Immigration Clinic students, Pablo Lopez and Grayson Carnahan, successfully got their client’s removal proceedings administratively closed after arguing that the client was a JOP class member and therefore the court did not have jurisdiction to adjudicate his asylum application.

During the previous calendar year, the Clinic represented hundreds of individuals in all non-employment based manner of immigration proceedings. Clinical Supervising Attorney, R. Parker Sheffy, was lead counsel in connection with two instances of notable representation, including:

1. serving as Lead Counsel before the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals on behalf of an asylum seeker who was found “not credible” by the Immigration Judge despite uncontroverted evidence of egregious persecution in the client’s home country resulting in the client’s permanent physical impairment and dismemberment, by presenting oral argument and then preparing and filing a Motion for Rehearing En Banc; and

2. winning an appeal before the U.S. Department of Justice, Board of Immigration Appeals, by proving the Immigration Judge erred by denying the Clinic’s client’s application for asylum and related relief based upon changes in the law. As a result of the Clinic’s successful advocacy before the Board of Immigration Appeals, the Client obtained lawful permanent residency as the wife and mother of U.S. Citizens after being in removal proceedings for more than a decade.

Immigration Clinic students, Christopher Cuevas and Elisa Taverna, under the supervision of Immigration Clinic Director, Teresa Messer, and Clinical Supervising Attorney, Lucas Atsenberg, zealously represented two Afghan sisters who are women’s rights activists at their asylum interview. The sisters were persecuted by the Taliban for reporting about the Taliban’s human rights abuses against Afghan women.

Clinic students, Pablo Lopez and Grayson Carnahan, preparing an asylum seeker for his merits hearing.

Clinic students, Sai Gudapati and Cesar Rivera Infante, zealously advocated for an Afghan man seeking asylum protection from the Taliban’s oppression.

Clinic students, Narmada Sapkota and Stephanie Melgar Garcia, preparing an asylum seeker for her merits hearing.

Clinic students celebrating their last day of class.
The UHLC Immigration Clinic has been one of the most formative experiences of my law school career. While there, I was given the opportunity to truly own live cases with the advantage of having knowledgeable professors offer guidance and support when I needed it. This hands-on experience helping individuals from our Houston community solidified my inclination towards non-profit immigration legal work. After my semester with the UHLC Immigration Clinic, I was immediately offered a clerkship at the St. Frances Cabrini Center for Immigrant Legal Services in the unaccompanied children’s department. The position offers the flexibility to continue law school full-time while I grow my proficiency and my connections in the non-profit legal world. The attorneys and staff at Cabrini tell me that the UHLC Immigration Clinic has a strong reputation for preparing students well. I can personally attest to the truth in that because I am constantly drawing from the knowledge I gained at the UHLC Immigration clinic.

Elisa Tavera, Clinic I, Fall 2022
Current 3L

I had the privilege of participating in the UHLC Immigration Clinic, where I gained invaluable insight into the field of immigration law and how it can transform lives. During my time in the clinic, I had the opportunity to work with experienced attorneys and gain practical skills in a variety of immigration-related matters. This experience has given me a unique perspective on the challenges faced by individuals navigating the immigration system and the important role that attorneys play in providing support and representation.

My participation in the clinic also provided me with valuable networking opportunities that have proven instrumental in securing my current position at The Modi Law Firm. Through the clinic, I was introduced to Susham Modi, a former UHLC Clinic supervising attorney, which played a pivotal role in securing my current clerkship and opened doors to exciting new opportunities.

I highly recommend the UHLC Immigration Clinic to any student interested in pursuing a career in immigration law as it provides an excellent opportunity to gain practical experience, make professional connections, and explore the different facets of the immigration legal field. Overall, the UHLC Immigration Clinic has had a profound impact on my professional and personal development, and I will forever be grateful for the experience and the opportunities it has provided me.

Cesar Rivera Infante, Clinic I, Fall 2022
Current 3L
The UHLC Immigration Clinic deepened my understanding and appreciation of the desperate need for immigrant advocacy. Though I plan on going into private practice in other matters, the Clinic ingrained in me a deep desire to diligently request and take on pro bono immigration matters whenever possible when I begin work.

Further, my work at the Clinic helped me secure an externship with the non-profit BakerRipley for the following Spring. My knowledge of several immigration sub-fields and extensive hands-on experience and training from the Clinic streamlined the interview process. It was clear from my conversations that the work that the Clinic does is well-known and respected in the Houston immigration law community.

I enjoyed my first semester at the immigration clinic so much that I decided to rejoin the following semester. Learning how to interact with clients is a valuable experience and excites me about my future. I see my family in my clients, which motivates me to continue. The UHLC Immigration clinic did a stellar job preparing me for client interviews, immigration court, legal research, and writing. These skills made me a marketable candidate to intern for a US Immigration Court. The DOJ appreciated the diverse number of cases I’ve worked on and how much knowledge I had of the system. Immigration law is a steep learning curve, and the UHLC Immigration clinic prepared me to navigate it well.

Anyone remotely interested in Immigration law should apply for the Immigration clinic.

Grayson Carnahan, Clinic I, Spring 2022
Current 3L

Kayla Vasquez, Clinic I and II, Fall 2022 – Spring 2023
Current 3L

Immigration Clinic: Inspiring and Enabling Students to Continue Practicing Immigration Law

Immigration Clinic 2022 - 2023
Community Outreach: Making Unprecedented Impact Within Greater-Houston and the State of Texas

The Clinic completed its most ambitious and impactful year of outreach to date. The types of outreaches the Clinic participated in are of many different types, including: media appearances with news outlets including NPR, Telemundo, and the Guardian; assisting community partners with pro bono workshops to assist pro se applicants with specific processes; providing expertise upon substantive panels; coordinating interdisciplinary partnerships with departments within the University of Houston; cultivating relationships with private philanthropy and support services, such as Baylor College of Medicine’s Asylum Clinic; developing relationships with legal service organizations and international law firms; collaborating with Members of Congress, among many others. In total, the Clinic participated in over one-hundred outreaches where more than 2,000 individuals were impacted.

Particularly notable outreaches include:

► Participating in diplomatic discussions with a delegation of Guatemalan Members of Congress, where the Clinic provided our expertise to enable the delegation to best support their nationals, particularly those who may make the treacherous journey to the United States.

► Helping the Executive Office of Immigration Reviews Immigration Court develop and implement a “Friends of the Court” program, where Houston-area non-profits are invited to attend one of several Master Calendar Hearings. At these hearings, the Clinic assists unrepresented individuals with cases before the court to answer a host of questions, including Know Your Rights presentations, assisting with change of venue and change of address forms, providing resources to relevant non-profit organizations providing individuals with the contact information of those that provide representation for the types of relief required by the particular individual.

Immigration Clinic Director, Teresa Messer, Clinic Supervising Attorneys, Parker Sheffy and Lucas Aisenberg, and Clinic intern, Christopher Hernandez, volunteered as Friends of the Court for the Houston Immigration Court. The Friend of the Court program assists the Immigration Court by providing pro se respondents information about the immigration court process including information about their rights and responsibilities.

► Attendees learned about immigration courts, best practices for representing asylum seekers and navigating federal court appeals at this year’s Joseph A. Vail Asylum Law Workshop. The 2023 Joseph A. Vail Asylum Law Workshop offered insights and strategies from top immigration law experts on the nuances of this ever-changing landscape, instructing hundreds of attendees and raising thousands of dollars to support the University of Houston Law Center’s Immigration Clinic. More than 500 registrants gathered online and in-person to learn about the judicial role in U.S. immigration courts, best practices for representing asylum seekers including unaccompanied minors, navigating federal court appeals, and obtaining forensic and country conditions experts at this year’s Joseph A. Vail Asylum Law Workshop.
Community Outreach: Making Unprecedented Impact Within Greater-Houston and the State of Texas

► Presenting before the Board of the State Board of Texas, discussing the importance of immigration based legal needs in Houston and identifying trends requiring additional resources.

► Planning the first ever mixer between each of Houston’s three law schools’ immigration clinics, sponsored by the American Immigration Lawyers Association. This semester, the second bi-annual mixer is being held, sponsored by the State Bar of Texas.

Clinic students, Namratha Satish Kumar, Elva Lorena Gaona Gaona, Tamilla Suleymanova, and Alla Smirnova, volunteered at the Joseph A. Vail Asylum Law Workshop.

Immigration Clinic 2022 - 2023

The Immigration Clinic’s final class of the semester conducted a mock trial presided over by retired Honorable Immigration Judge Jimmie Benton and hosted by the Honorable Judge Beau Miller. Students, including undergrad interns from the Pipeline Program and UH College of Political Science, prepared for their roles for a month and did a fantastic job.

The Clinic co-hosted its first ever immigration clinic mixer between all of Houston’s law schools, Thurgood Marshall School of Law, South Texas College of Law Houston, and University of Houston Law Center.
Community Outreach: Making Unprecedented Impact
Within Greater-Houston and the State of Texas

Clinical Supervising Attorney, Parker Sheffy, participated in diplomatic discussions with a delegation of Guatemalan congressional members hosted by Rice University’s Baker Institute, Center for U.S. and Mexico.

Immigration Clinic students, Stephanie Melgar Garcia, Sai Gudapati, and Alyssa Craze-Awbrey, under the supervision of Immigration Clinic Director, Teresa Messer, volunteered at the Boat People SOS Citizenship Forum where they assisted Lawful Permanent Residents with their Naturalization applications.
Immigration Clinic students, Pablo Lopez, Christopher Cuevas, Grayson Carnahan, Elisa Tavera, Sai Gudapati, and Alyssa Craze-Awbrey, under the supervision of Immigration Clinic Director, Teresa Messer, volunteered at the BakerRipley Citizenship Forum where they assisted Lawful Permanent Residents with their Naturalization applications.

Jose Gutierrez
University of Houston Undergraduate, Intern

I was lucky enough to be paired with the UHLC Immigration Clinic through an undergraduate internship program. I was connected to the clinic due to my interests in immigration law, but some other students interned at organizations like BakerRipley.

Interning at the clinic was extremely fulfilling. My time at the clinic allowed me to gain an understanding of lawyer-client relations, and interviewing my client was not only helpful for building their case, but also in developing good rapport. Most importantly, I learned that this field of law is not for the faint of heart, as many clients have faced serious adversity.

After graduating I plan on attending law school and specializing in immigration law. Prior to interning at the clinic I didn’t have a particular interest or passion in any specific field of law, but my experience as an intern made me really passionate about pursuing immigration law.
Creating a Pipeline of Future Advocates: Undergraduate Intern Program

Christopher Hernandez
University of Houston Undergraduate, Intern

As someone who comes from an immigrant family, I was eager to help people with similar backgrounds achieve a better life. This country has been very generous to both me and my family and I wanted to help in any small way I could. I had no real insight as to what I would be doing but I have been more than happy with my experience so far. I have gotten to help on cases with real clients and very real consequences.

For me it has put into perspective just how important this work is and given me a new motivation to help others. I’m very grateful to be working alongside both gifted professors and law students on work that brings people closer to the life they want. The clinic has shown me that there will always be people who need our help and appreciate our work. I am not sure which path my legal career will take me but I am confident I will give back in any way I can.

Turab Abbas
University of Houston Undergraduate, Intern

As a recent immigrant to the United States with pending immigration proceedings, I gained a deep understanding of immigration laws from a unique perspective. I am immensely grateful to my supervising attorneys and fellow law students for their guidance and support.

In Fall 2023, I am excited to begin my J.D. studies at the University of Houston Law Center.