News



Jeanne Atkinson, former executive director of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network (Provided photo)



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St. Louis — February 15, 2019

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Jeanne Atkinson, executive director of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network (CLINIC) from March 2013 until February 2019, used to say she fell into her career in immigration law. Lately, she's started to wonder if that's really true.

Atkinson's adult working life has so far been devoted to providing legal services to immigrants, beginning with an internship with Catholic Charities in 1987 and continuing with 20 years at Catholic Charities Immigration Legal Services program in Washington, D.C., then nearly six years leading CLINIC.

She now traces her interest in immigration to sixth grade, where a favorite teacher — a Holocaust survivor who later had to flee Hungary during a revolution in the 1950s — related her life story in weekly installments.

"She talked about escaping in a bale of cotton and having soldiers poking the cotton with swords," Atkinson told NCR. Hearing "story after story about this woman that I loved needing to get away from a place that was not safe for her ... was really instrumental in believing that people had a right to safety and frankly also seeing the contributions of immigrants."

That may explain why even though Atkinson grew up in a homogenous area of St. Louis, she tried to find ways to engage with other cultures — hosting foreign exchange students, founding and leading the American Field Service club at her high school, and ultimately majoring in French and international development in college.

It could also explain why she has stayed in the immigration law field since her post-college internship with Catholic Charities helping immigrants apply for legalization under the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act.

"Jeanne has truly dedicated her career to advocating on behalf of her clients and the immigrant community," Jacqueline Rishty, director of Catholic Charities Immigration Legal Services in the Washington Archdiocese, said in an email to NCR.

Rishty has worked with Atkinson for close to 26 years, most recently in her role as the head of an organization that partners with CLINIC, but also when Atkinson worked as a Catholic Charities immigration attorney and later as its Immigration Legal Services director.

Helping people regularize their immigration status can affect almost every area of their lives, leaving them less vulnerable to abuse from employers, landlords or domestic partners, as well as ensuring they can remain in the U.S., Atkinson said.

During her tenure at CLINIC, Atkinson has ramped up the organization's efforts to develop new ways to support immigrant groups left vulnerable by the current administration's policies, tap the full potential of CLINIC's growing network, and create systemic change through advocacy and litigation.



Jeanne Atkinson speaks to a TV news reporter at CLINIC's offices in Washington, D.C. (Provided photo)

She's only leaving now to move to Rome with her husband, who was recently hired by an international nongovernmental organization. She became director emeritus Feb. 4 upon the arrival of current executive director Anna Marie Gallagher, formerly head of litigation practice at a Washington-based immigration law firm.

After her last day in the office Feb. 15, Atkinson will serve CLINIC as a consultant as needed for several months.

"Jeanne Atkinson's legacy will continue for decades," said Charity Sr. Sally Duffy, treasurer on CLINIC's board. "She's led CLINIC through an incredibly challenging and difficult period and done it with grace, with wisdom, but using what the law is intended to do to ensure the rights and the protection of immigrants."

Expanding the network

According to its website, CLINIC was founded in 1988 by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops "to support a rapidly growing network of community-based immigration programs," which were expanding in response to the 1986 legalization program. CLINIC provides its partners legal training and help with capacity-building and conducts administrative advocacy.

Today, CLINIC is the nation's largest network of nonprofit immigration programs. One of Atkinson's greatest contributions has been expanding that network even farther while encouraging its member organizations to collaborate for maximum impact, said Michelle Sardone, who joined CLINIC over seven years ago and is currently director of strategic initiatives.

"[Atkinson's] work informing collaborations with other organizations and engaging pro bono attorneys has been remarkable in terms of CLINIC being able to meet the needs in a crisis period," Duffy said.

During Atkinson's time as director, CLINIC's number of affiliates has increased from about 210 to about 360. The capacity-building department expects to add 40 more in the coming year. Located in 47 states and the District of Columbia, the affiliates are about 50 percent Catholic but include faith-based organizations from nearly every tradition, as well as farmworker programs, libraries and domestic violence shelters.

CLINIC is also discovering the power of its network in new ways, Atkinson said. Instead of solely focusing on CLINIC's one-on-one relationship with each affiliate, the organization is helping affiliates share information and expertise with each other. It also uses the network to recognize and respond to trends not visible on a smaller level, such as alerting the government that a computer glitch had lost 1 percent of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals applications.

While CLINIC also helps train lawyers, much of the legal training is aimed at "accredited representatives," non-attorneys who are certified to practice immigration law in a limited way if they provide free or low-cost services and work for organizations that are also accredited.

A CLINIC video interviews accredited representatives in Addison, Illinois. (YouTube/Catholic Legal Immigration Network Inc.)

At the most recent estimate, about 45 percent of accredited representatives nationwide and 30 percent of accredited organizations were part of the CLINIC network.

According to Sardone, Atkinson has been instrumental in ensuring all of CLINIC's departments cooperate to move as many partially accredited representatives as possible to full accreditation, which allows them to represent clients in immigration court.

Atkinson called these efforts "near and dear to my heart" because accreditation increases legal representation while empowering the accredited representatives themselves, many of whom are women of color.

"They haven't been to law school ... but they bring so many skills in working with clients — cultural competence, language ability, interviews, questioning skills — that when they get trained, they're amazing," Atkinson said.

CLINIC itself is also expanding, with 66 staff positions currently, compared to 42 in April 2013. This growth helps make the organization more flexible and better able to respond to new challenges — such as the increase in family detention under the Obama administration or the Trump administration's termination of temporary protected status for most migrants protected by it.

Atkinson also hopes that if a more immigrant-friendly administration comes into power, CLINIC will be poised to advocate for reform and respond effectively to positive developments: for example, helping formerly undocumented immigrants take advantage of a new path to legal status.

Atkinson was one of the leaders of the Committee on Immigration Reform Implementation, a group of national partners working together to ensure they have the greatest impact possible instead of duplicating services, said Sardone.



Jeanne Atkinson speaks at a press conference held with other Catholic agency heads in January 2017 after the Trump administration announced a travel ban on certain Muslim-majority countries. (Provided photo)

"When this administration ends, it's not like everything is going to be happiness and light, right?" Atkinson said. "There's a tremendous amount of effort that's going to need to go into how do we rebuild some of the things that have been shredded. ... We need to make sure that our affiliates are at the strongest point they can be because that will be useful, whether there are ugly things happening or positive things happening."

Perpetual drive to do more

Recently, it's been the ugly things that have absorbed much of CLINIC's attention, even inspiring it to create a "Defending Vulnerable Populations Project" to increase the number of pro bono attorneys and fully accredited representatives who are able to represent people in immigration court.

Sardone noted, "Both when we have had super exciting times when we were implementing new changes to immigration policy, and also now more recently when we've been responding to some increased enforcement and some increased negative immigration policies, [Atkinson] has been a super strong leader that has really gotten us through both ends of the spectrum."

CLINIC has been a part of advocacy, litigation and legal support efforts related to:

- Travel bans barring migrants from specific countries;
- Reduction of refugee admissions;
- Termination of temporary protected status for the vast majority of those shielded by it;
- Changes to "public charge" guidelines that penalize migrants applying for legal status for using public benefits;
- Border policies such as "zero tolerance" and restrictions on asylum seekers.

But there are hopeful developments too, such as a screening project CLINIC funded in the South that led to an estimate that around 2 million undocumented immigrants nationwide might be eligible for legal status, if only they could be supported to successfully apply for it.

The CARA Family Detention Pro Bono Representation and Advocacy Project, Atkinson's proudest accomplishment at CLINIC, also demonstrates CLINIC's strengths and its perpetual drive to do more. The organization was invited to participate in the collaboration among four immigrant rights organizations because of its "demonstrated expertise" with management and capacity-building, Atkinson said.

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Started in 2015, the project provides legal representation for the thousands of women and children detained in the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley and the Karnes County Residential Center in Karnes City, both family detention facilities in Texas, as the women prepare for interviews that determine whether they are allowed to remain in the U.S. to pursue a full asylum case.

"There was this expectation that that was going to be a holding point for people to just get deported and, by being in there, we not only were able to protect individuals but I think we were able to make a very strong showing why people were fleeing and

that they needed assistance," Atkinson said.

She's especially proud that CLINIC didn't become complacent after its success with the program. Instead, the organization took steps to make sure women were supported as they left detention, such as creating a Facebook group to provide legal advice and encouraging affiliates to take on more asylum cases.

"It's not like 'We helped set up this project at Dilley, now let's pat ourselves on the back,' " Atkinson said. "That was important; what's next?"

'America's my country'

CLINIC's expansion during her time there has helped Atkinson continue her career-long trend of gradually serving more and more immigrants.

Her work as an attorney touched hundreds of people a year. As director of the Catholic Charities legal services and refugee center, she oversaw a program that served several thousand. As director of CLINIC, Atkinson led a network that assists more than half a million immigrants every year.

While Atkinson is happy with the way her role has changed, her memories of working directly with clients and her interactions with affiliates who still do direct work have kept her motivated.



A woman waits for her number to seek asylum in the United States at the Chaparral border crossing in Tijuana, Mexico, Jan. 28. (CNS/Reuters/Shannon Stapleton)

"Jeanne always demonstrated genuine care and concern for the challenges facing immigrants," said Rishty. "I also think that her 'on the ground,' local experience at Catholic Charities gave her a great background to then work for immigrants' rights on a national level."

Atkinson chokes up when she tells the story of a man from North Africa who came into her office during the aftermath of 9/11, when immigrants faced intense scrutiny. He wanted a lawyer to look at the note that he carried in his pocket in case he got stopped by police and was too nervous to speak English.

"It said, 'I love America. America's my country. I would never hurt America.' And he just wanted to make sure that he could get that message across. That was a unique time, but to think that somebody would feel like he had to carry that in his wallet is heartbreaking," Atkinson said.

She also remembers a tall, strong client from Zaire who stoically described his jailing and torture in his home country, but cried when he talked about saying goodbye to his mom, whom he will probably never see again.

The man won asylum, moved to Boston and became a nurse's aide. "He was a success story," Atkinson said. "And yet he may never see his mom again. ... That's the part that people don't get. Most of us, most human beings, don't choose to move. ... Most people want to be with their family, their language, their culture."

Atkinson understands this on another level, now that she's moving to Rome. Her transition is freely chosen and happening under the best of circumstances. But while she knows she's "super, super fortunate," she also misses the U.S. and is experiencing how difficult it can be to adjust to an unfamiliar language, culture and legal system.

That's all the more reason why she believes people who arrive with much fewer resources, and no option of safely returning home, deserve support.

"People want to be in their communities and when they need to move I think we have an obligation to figure out how to welcome people," Atkinson said.

[Maria Benevento is an NCR Bertelsen intern. NCR national correspondent Heidi Schlumpf contributed to this story.]