News

Staff of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network lead a court skills training as part of the organization's Partial to Full Accreditation Initiative in February 2025. (Courtesy of CLINIC)

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For more than three decades, the Catholic Legal Immigration Network Inc., known as CLINIC, has stood at the intersection of faith and immigration law, translating Catholic teaching on human dignity into practical legal aid for newcomers to the United States.

Formed by the U.S. Catholic bishops in 1988, the organization has built one of the nation's largest nonprofit immigration networks, supporting hundreds of community-based programs that together assist nearly half a million immigrants each year.

In 2025, that steady mission meets a far less stable reality. Rapid shifts in federal immigration policy — often made through executive directives rather than legislation — have unsettled long-established processes and forced organizations like CLINIC to adapt quickly.

What was once consistent legal work grounded in precedent has become, for many of its attorneys, a process of defending the system itself.

In interviews with the National Catholic Reporter, CLINIC's leaders said the changes reach beyond the law. The organization's Catholic identity frames migration as a moral, not partisan, issue — a call to "welcome the stranger," drawn from the Gospel of Matthew. But policy turbulence now tests how that principle can be lived out in practice.

Among those seeing the change firsthand is Miguel Naranjo, director of CLINIC's Religious Immigration Services. His small team in Washington, D.C., assists dioceses and religious orders that bring priests, sisters and other faith workers to serve in U.S. parishes, schools and hospitals.

Miguel Naranjo (Courtesy of CLINIC)

"The pace and number of policy adjustments have been unlike anything I've seen," Naranjo said. "Procedures that were consistent for years are suddenly being replaced or removed, often without public notice."

His office has watched visa durations shortened for certain African and Asian countries, new restrictions appear without explanation and appeals processes grow more complex.

Through it all, CLINIC continues to base its work on two principles: due process and human dignity.

"Everyone, even those here without legal status, deserves a fair hearing," Naranjo said. "And beyond the law, they deserve to be treated with respect."

He also said the changes in immigration policy have had an impact on the Catholic Church. With fewer priests and sisters in the U.S., many dioceses rely on religious workers from Africa and Asia, where vocations continue to grow. "If access to visas tightens," he said, "that affects communities directly, like parishes, schools, hospitals. Religious workers are essential workers."

And amid the turmoil of federal funding cuts and shifting immigration policies, Catholic nonprofits have faced a stark choice: continue serving vulnerable immigrants or risk losing the resources to operate. Allyson DiPofi, a senior attorney on CLINIC's Training and Technical Assistance Team, said the chaos of 2025 "has sort of infiltrated every area of nonprofit immigration legal practice."

Her team provides training and technical assistance on law, policy, ethics and program management — work that has become urgent as affiliates struggle to adapt.

One of the earliest and most striking challenges came from a large program serving unaccompanied children. With a staff of more than 20, it had built a robust legal practice, only to be ordered by its parent organization to reduce staff to seven.

DiPofi recalled the ethical and practical dilemmas this created: "Ethically, they can't handle that volume of cases with just seven people. They didn't want to walk away from the representation and leave the children without any help in court, especially in light of the fact that the administration was simultaneously changing policies to make it easier to deport children."

The stakes were immense, and the program's manager was left "in tears ... with this huge responsibility for all these kids."

Other local programs have faced similar crises. Cuts to federal grants, including the termination of the refugee resettlement program, have forced some affiliates to consider scaling back or even closing their immigration services. "We saw that leaders were willing to entertain the idea of just walking away from the mission of serving noncitizens, because they were scared," DiPofi said.

Even amid these pressures, she said she sees a strong current of resilience. Many programs are finding ways to pivot, exploring alternative funding or adjusting their services to keep the mission alive. As DiPofi put it, "Even though the systems are being dismantled and it's frustrating, the ability to do the work in some ways — that attitude — doesn't change."

CLINIC continues to guide affiliates through these turbulent times, helping them sustain services wherever possible, she said.

Bishop Jaime Soto of Sacramento, Calif., speaks at a National Catholic Association of Diocesan Directors for Hispanic Ministry conference in Houston Oct. 11, 2023. (OSV News/Texas Catholic Herald/James Ramos)

If DiPofi and Naranjo represent CLINIC's technical response to a changing legal landscape, Bishop Jaime Soto of Sacramento, California, speaks to the organization's spiritual and institutional continuity. As chairman of CLINIC's board of directors, he has watched the network weather political and financial storms before. But 2025, he said to NCR, has been "an extraordinary year" for those serving immigrants.

Soto's connection to CLINIC stretches back to its origins, when he was working for Catholic Charities in Orange County, California, when President Ronald Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986.

Nearly four decades later, Soto faces a new challenge: a year marked by deep federal funding cuts to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Migration and Refugee Services. While CLINIC operates as an independent nonprofit, those cuts have had ripple effects across the church's network of immigrant ministries.

But Soto said that despite the turbulence, the church's commitment to immigrants remains unwavering. "There's never really been an orderly or tranquil period in immigration," he said. "It's always complex, confusing and heartbreaking, but we keep the commitment to serve immigrants and to walk with immigrants, to provide them with our churches and a sense of haven — of where they come and feel at home, welcomed."

CLINIC has not faced the same level of financial damage as the U.S. bishops' Migration and Refugee Services did when their federal contracts were sharply reduced early in 2025, Soto said. But the cuts have forced CLINIC to "adapt again and take on some of the work MRS can no longer do," he said.

That adjustment has practical and pastoral consequences. "People are frightened," Soto said.

Soto hears constant concern from clergy for their congregations whose members wonder if they should go back to their home countries, because they can't live with the uncertainty here. "They won't go out, and they won't let their children out. They won't come to Mass," the priests tell him.

The bishop has seen the effects in his own diocese. "I have three priests currently outside the country because their religious worker visas lapsed. They're waiting a year before they can reapply. And I have another one preparing to do the same," he said.

Even with uncertainty, Soto insists that the church's message must remain steady. "When bishops gather, we always speak about migrants and refugees," he said. "We can't predict outcomes, but we can say this: We will walk with you. We will find our way together."

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