

August 31, 2007

Dear Client,

Recent and proposed changes to the Religious Worker Visa Program (RWVP) have resulted in severe challenges for dioceses and religious communities. I write to provide background on these changes and the proposed regulations and to encourage you to voice opposition to them. These changes have already begun and will continue to hinder the Church's ability to bring foreign born priests, sisters, brothers and lay workers into the United States.

If enacted as proposed, the final regulations will: (1) decrease the amount of time a religious worker may remain in the United States, (2) significantly increase the cost of bringing in foreign born religious workers, (3) impose onerous restrictions on eligibility for religious worker status, and (4) cause massive delays in processing. The changes will apply to both the nonimmigrant (R-1) and the special immigrant (green card) programs. The proposal will affect parishes, Catholic schools, hospitals, and all social service networks staffed by religious workers, adversely impacting the Church's ability to minister to its members.

In addition to the proposed regulations, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has eliminated expedited processing of religious worker cases, increased fees by over 65 percent, and imposed mandatory site visits to dioceses and religious orders as part of the religious worker petition process. These changes have almost brought the processing of religious worker cases to a standstill. As a result of delays, many religious workers who fulfill vital roles in the Church's mission have been or will be forced to abandon their work in the United States in order to avoid immigration status violations.

For example, consider the case of a priest in California whose religious worker visa petition (the first step in the green card application process) was pending for over one year. As a result of the delay, he was forced to return to his home country in order to avoid violating his immigration status. He left behind a parish with a large Latino population that depended on him for the sacraments, homilies and religious education in Spanish. His departure has devastated his parishioners who report a deep sense of sorrow and loss.

Recently, Most Reverend Gerald R. Barnes, the Chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishop's Committee on Migration, has asked all U.S. Bishops to send letters to President Bush requesting that significant changes be made to the proposed regulations. We encourage you to use the enclosed materials to write a similar letter to the President. It is critical that the President hear from as many religious orders, organizations, and dioceses as possible about the damaging impact the changes and proposed regulations are having on religious workers.

Enclosed please find the following:

- Memo from Most Reverend Gerald R. Barnes to all U.S. Bishops;
- Sample letter drafted by USCCB to President Bush;
- USCCB Summary of Proposed Regulation on Religious Workers;
- Additional points from CLINIC about the proposed regulations.

We hope that these materials will enable you to draft your own letter to the President. We urge you to use the sample letter as a model, but to personalize the letter, especially the first sentence of the letter, so that it reflects your organization's identity and your title or role within the organization. Please add stories of your religious worker, the population s/he serves, and how that population has been or will be negatively impacted by the proposed regulations. The more you personalize and adapt the letter to your organization's experience, the more weight it will carry.

Please send the letter by email (comments@whitehouse.gov) or by fax (202-456-2461) to the White House, and provide CLINIC with a copy by sending it to me at mperron@cliniclegal.org. We encourage you to send the letter within the next month, as we anticipate issuance of the final regulations soon.

Sincerely,

Sr. Margaret Perron
Director, Division of Religious Immigration Services
Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.