



Webinar: Enhancing Your Client-Advocate Relationships: Navigating Literacy and Cultural Challenges When Serving Afghan Clients

February 6, 2024, 1:00 – 2:00 PM ET

Transcript

Introduction

Ashley DiGiore: Welcome, everyone. We're going to give it just a moment for people to get logged in. We're so glad that you're here.

[pause]

AD: If you have a question right off the bat, you can type it into the Q&A. We'll go over our Zoom settings in just a moment. We'll give it another 30 seconds and then we'll get going.

Ahmad Osmani: Good afternoon, everyone.

AD: Good afternoon. Thank you so much.

AO: Of course. I apologize for being late.

AD: It's okay, no worries. We are going to start in just a moment. We have lots of people joining us. Okay. It is 1:02, so we'll go ahead and jump in. Thank you, everyone, for joining today's training on Enhancing Your Client-Advocate Relationships: Navigating Literacy and Cultural Challenges When Serving Afghan Clients. This training is presented to you by Switchboard. Switchboard is a one-stop resource hub for refugee service providers in the United States.

Zoom Orientation

AD: We'll go over our Zoom settings for today. It's a Zoom webinar, so you are joining on listen-only mode. Due to the large number of learners on today's webinar, we've disabled the chat box. However, you do have the option to send messages to the speakers and co-facilitators via the Q&A. Keep an eye on the chat for messages from Switchboard and links to various resources that we'll mention throughout. Today's webinar will run for about 60 minutes, and it is being recorded. You'll receive an e-mail with the recording, slides, and recommended resources within 24 hours. The webinar transcript, along with the recording, will be posted on the Switchboard website within the following days.



AD: Lastly, we ask that you kindly complete our webinar satisfaction survey at the conclusion of our session. This short, three-question survey helps us here at Switchboard continuously improve our training and technical assistance offerings to you all.

Today's Facilitator and Speakers

AD: Today's facilitator is me, Ashley DiGiore, and I'm the program manager for VECINA's Afghan projects. I've been involved with VECINA and with immigration since 2021, and I am a DOJ-accredited representative.

AD: More importantly, today's speakers: We have Kristen Nilsen, who joins VECINA from private practice. For the past five years, she has run a solo practice in Northern California, helping clients navigate our complex immigration laws. She previously worked with other organizations to provide low-cost legal assistance to refugees. Kristen has ample experience mentoring and training legal students and representatives and worked as an immigration services officer with USCIS before transitioning to work with refugees.

AD: We also have Harriet Amelia Wessel, who is an associate with Norton Rose Fulbright in Houston, Texas. She is a pro bono attorney volunteer with VECINA. She recently worked on an asylum case with an Afghan client with low literacy and successfully navigated the challenges she and her client faced throughout the process, and her client received a grant of asylum in September 2023. She has taken on another case with us at VECINA as well.

AD: We also have Mary Ann McLean, who is a passionate immigrant advocate and a DOJ-accredited representative with VECINA. She is an August 2021 graduate of Villanova's VIISTA Program and has assisted with numerous applications for Afghan clients, including humanitarian parole and asylum applications, as well as applications for Temporary Protected Status. She continues to volunteer with VECINA as an accredited representative, and with Team Themis as a volunteer advocate.

AD: We also have Ahmad Osmani, who is an Afghan national and graduate of Kabul Medical University. He currently works as a case manager with the State Department's care team, and as an interpreter for Afghan clients. He previously worked as an operation coordinator for Afghan newcomers in the U.S. and as a cultural advisor for two-star Marine generals in Afghanistan.

Learning Objectives

AD: Today's learning objectives: By the end of today's session, you will be able to name strategies for conducting efficient, culturally appropriate intakes for potential Afghan clients with low literacy levels; be able to communicate more clearly with Afghan clients about the requirements for immigration benefits; and ask linguistically accessible questions to gather information from Afghan clients in order to better prepare their cases.

Discussion Question

AD: With that, as we learned today, we would love for you to be a part of our conversations. We're going to use Slido to help engage all of us in today's discussions. If all the participants could please take a moment to scan the QR code on the screen or click the link in the chat to join our Slido and share your thoughts in just a moment. You can use the QR code, or if you go to slido.com, it'll ask you to input the code, which is in the chat and also on the screen. Just watching the clock to give everyone time to log in.



AD: All right, we can go ahead to the question. The QR code and information is also on the screen. Great. As we frame our discussions for today, we were hoping you could share some of the challenges you might have faced working specifically with Afghan clients.

What challenges have you faced when working with Afghan clients?

AD: Each culture has their own characteristics and experiences that make our interactions with them different from our interactions with other cultures. Please share your thoughts using the Slido. We've got a quick person already, mental health misconceptions, outmigration when arriving solo, language barriers, wow, distrustful of staff, language, yes. False information spreads quickly, for sure. Gender norms, anxiety, and trauma, speaking languages that aren't readily available. So many great ideas. Transportation, that's a new one.

AD: Altering documents, engaging with the family domestic violence, men making decisions for their wives, gender norms, yes. Mental health again. I like that Slido gives us a little overview, which you can all see. Language, culture, gender, men and women, mental health. We'll be talking about a lot of this in today's presentation. I don't want to cut anyone off. Oh, perfect. Okay. Again, thank you for sharing your thoughts. Those are all really helpful, and our hope today is to help you find ways to overcome some of those challenges.

Our Goal

AD: We believe that by conducting intakes that are culturally appropriate, linguistically accessible, and efficient, you'll be able to communicate more clearly with Afghan clients about the requirements for immigration benefits, ask better questions, and gather better information in order to prepare your clients' cases.

Afghan Culture

AD: With that, we will begin today's discussion talking about the Afghan culture. Ahmad, would you share some important aspects of the Afghan culture with us, please?

AO: Of course, Ms. Ashley. Thank you so much, and *salam* to everyone. I would like to thank Ms. Ashley and other speakers for giving me the opportunity to represent the Afghan culture today. As we all know, Afghan people are known for their hospitality, and in addition, Islam plays a significant role in the Afghan culture. Family is also highly valued in Afghan culture. Preserving family honor and respect is deeply rooted in Afghan culture.

AO: Also, in order to build a relationship with an Afghan client, it is essential to acknowledge culture and linguistic barriers. We can accomplish this by utilizing interpreters, avoiding jargon, and involving family members if needed.

AO: It is also crucial to be mindful of Afghan culture norms and, more importantly, gender roles and power dynamics. I have worked for many years as a culture advisor in Afghanistan and also interpreter here in the stateside. Throughout my work, I encountered situations where medical questions [were] asked to the female and replied [to] by the male. This is not a culture. This is just a typical mindset which should be noted when we're working with Afghan clients.



AO: Also, due to lack of education, some Afghans are struggling with providing information, some of their personal basic information, which can be a challenge to our advocate. I believe we can build trust and ensure that Afghan clients with low literacy level feel comfortable sharing their experiences.

AD: Thank you so much. I had a minor mute issue. Thank you. Mary Ann, would you mind sharing how you've experienced these cultural aspects in your work? Before you jump on, Ahmad, I'm so sorry. We see in the question and answer that your video is not clear. I don't know if you're able to turn off your virtual background so that it clears it up a little bit while Mary Ann shares her thoughts, please.

AO: Of course.

Mary Ann McLean: Yes. Thank you for including me on the panel. Certainly, the responses that populated the Slido, most of those are experiences that I've had in dealing with Afghan clients. They're all very real issues. I'll just call out a couple that I've experienced recently, and we can certainly discuss more in-depth later.

MAM: The gender role issue is certainly something very important, and I actually experienced it on a case where the client had some sort of issue with our interpreter over Zoom. The interpreter was a woman, the client was a man, and it was either because of a linguistic barrier or some sort of cultural barrier. They had an off-site discussion, not off-site, but a sidebar discussion in which something happened and she had to leave because it was too upsetting for her, something he said to her. There are these challenges sometimes that have to be dealt with.

MAM: In another issue, we found that drawing out the story from a client can be challenging, either because of trauma or they're not accustomed to being asked questions in this way before and having to illuminate their story in depth. Of course, we want to get as much depth of their story as possible. There are some techniques, which I think we'll talk about, to getting really a good, clear story.

MAM: With respect to illiterate clients, we certainly have had that experience, and preparing them for their interviews is very challenging. Often we like to give a cheat sheet to them to prepare them and to review before their interview. If they can't read, then that's a challenge. That takes extra time and preparation to prepare them.

MAM: Lastly, I'll just say on the linguistic aspect, I have a client right now who speaks Dari, and Google Translate doesn't work very well for Dari. These are just things to experience in a day-to-day life of an advocate. I'll stop there and, of course, illuminate more later.

1. Case Scenario #1

AD: Thank you for sharing all of that, Mary Ann. Now we'll go ahead and we're going to jump to a Slido again. We're going to follow this case scenario throughout today's session as we talk about these different topics. Thinking about Afghan culture, we have a not-real client, Farzad. This is a pretend situation but something you could encounter. Farzad, an Afghan newcomer who entered the U.S. with humanitarian parole in August 2023, comes to your office for an intake.



Discussion Question

While speaking with you, Farzad is unable to identify precise dates, such as dates of birth or when the Taliban came to search his house. In what ways might this affect the preparation of the case?

AD: On the next slide, we'll see the Slido. Okay, I got nervous there. Please share your thoughts, participants, and, of course, our panelists will jump in as well. How might the not being able to identify precise dates affect preparation of a case when working with an Afghan client? Clarity, for sure. It could be because of a lack of trust. I'm going to address the one question really quick.

AD: Why are we asking him about deep trauma? If he's coming in to a legal provider to access legal services to maybe apply for asylum, like someone just said, we have to get into those details, and it's really important to include specific details. Yes, that would cause difficulty filling out applications. It could cause issues in an interview, like Mary Ann said. Perfect. While we have some more of these thoughts coming in. Panelists, what do you think about these ideas, or do you have any strategies to add? Please don't be sorry, participants.

Harriet Amelia Wessel: Actually, I have had this experience in the interview situation where USCIS decided to give my client a date of birth because he wasn't able to provide his own. I think that, for the client, was perhaps not a particularly nice situation because he felt he was being given something by the government that is unique to him, and he has a date of birth, and he has that somewhere, but he wasn't able to communicate. I just think that's something for us to remember. People come with their own identity, and you're imposing one on them if they're not able to communicate that. Just something to bear in mind.

AD: I like that. I didn't think about that, that it's a part of their identity that we're just throwing at them.

AD: And I can't believe this one comment: "We have adults listed as teenagers." I've heard of minor discrepancies like a couple years maybe, but not like big gaps there. Someone says many Afghans don't keep records of dates of birth. Ahmad, have you found that to be consistent in the Afghan culture?

AO: Yes, that is so true. I've been encountering that a lot during the past two years, especially when I was working on a project to the [inaudible] with some of the shelters around the United States. A lot of minors, they were actually adults, but they listed as a teenager, maybe under 18. This is the one issue that we don't—it is not a culture, but again, due to four decades of war in Afghanistan, people [were] not getting records of their children's date of birth. Also at the hospital, which is OB hospitals, they don't provide such a documentation or they are not registered on the spot.

AD: Yes, thank you. I'm so sorry. We're having issues with unmuting here, but perfect. Yes. Someone says "1/1/year" is a birthdate for most of our clients. I feel like that's something that's come up as well. Something we just want to clarify, we're not trying to generalize all of the Afghans, that every Afghan is like this, just some common themes that we're seeing or some aspects that seem to be true in many cases. We could probably talk about this forever, but we'll go ahead and keep going so that we can get to all of the topics.

Tips for Culturally Appropriate Intakes

AD: Just to give you some general tips for culturally appropriate intakes, where possible, match the provider and client gender. A female client with a female provider, same for males. Follow cultural norms for shaking



hands and for other greetings. Ensure mutual understanding by summarizing meeting points and asking questions when uncertain. Establish trust by emphasizing confidentiality.

2. Case Scenario #2

Linguistically Accessible

AD: We'll move on to our next main topic today, which is making sure we're using accessible language when speaking with clients. Kristen, can you share more about what this means and how you do this?

Kristen Nilsen: Sure. Thank you, Ashley. Nice to meet everybody today. To give some context, I've been working with Afghan clients since about 2017, so before the big evacuation. I have a lot of context as far as how to interact with them. I've worked with the people from Afghanistan with all sorts of language abilities because obviously there are people who work as translators and there are people who are new and don't speak any English. There's a lot of variation within the community.

KN: I think the most important thing when talking about making your interactions with your clients linguistically accessible is not to use big words, like linguistically accessible. It's that kind of jargon and the large words that are very particular to English that make it hard to understand. In the context of immigration when you're talking about, does somebody speak English or do they understand English, you're talking about a third-grade level. Basically, that's the standard for being able to speak English in the immigration context.

KN: When you're speaking with clients, keep that in mind. You're going to have people who are very good at English, much better at English than I am [in] any of the other languages I speak. Then they're going to be able to communicate with them just fine. But there are other people you're going to want to take it back, think about, I'm talking, they're not a child, but think about how I would communicate this to a child, somebody who is not going to understand all the ins and outs of the language.

KN: We want to use communication that we can all understand. So we want to be clear in purpose, use plain language, don't use the jargon or the idioms. If you have acronyms—immigration is very big on acronyms—take time to define them. Don't just throw out, “We're going to do this with USCIS,” or “We have to go through DSHS to do all this.” You want to take time to define what those agencies are. “We're going to be working with the immigration agency,” or “We're going to be working with Human Services and the people that oversee all the benefits and the housing,” and things like that, how these agencies... what they're going to do rather than just as their acronyms.

KN: Another important thing is to use consistent language. For me, I can be an attorney, I can be a lawyer, I can be all these different things. They all mean the same thing. It can be confusing if I'm referring to myself as all these different things. So, being consistent in the terms that we use.

KN: I also think that as far as working with Afghan clients... it makes it much easier to communicate and to share our points with one another if we're comfortable with one another. So, building rapport. I smile a lot. I'm very informal in my intakes and [when] I'm working with my clients. I smile a lot. I cannot emphasize [enough] the importance of good greetings in Afghan culture. Putting your hand over your heart shows so much empathy and welcoming so that people are able to open up with you.



KN: Then there are just other things like we've touched on before and we'll touch on again later on this is reemphasizing points, going over things over again. If you get a question you don't have the answer to, come back and take a step back and say, "Okay, this is how they understood this question. How do I need to step back to get the answer I need?"

KN: We'll show an example of that in just a moment. I'm going to think that is it for me for now. I think Ashley had a couple other points on this.

AD: Thank you very much, Kirsten. Harriet, do you have anything to add to Kirsten's suggestions?

HAW: Yes, I think all Kirsten's suggestions are really helpful. The one thing that I find really helpful in terms of getting communication across to our Afghan clients is using Zoom or video calls. That helped me build trust. I had a male Afghan client. He was a lot older than me. In terms of the respect pyramid, definitely older and a man. It was important for him to understand that I was trying to meet him at his level. When we would struggle with the communication verbally, if we were waiting for the translator or if they left the room, he was able to see me smiling.

HAW: I was attempting to dress as conservatively as possible to show my respect for him. I think that really helped us build a rapport. When he would have follow-up questions or he would like to call me with a friend of his that wasn't a professional interpreter, he would video call me. We would have a video chat. That's just something to think about. If you're comfortable, I think that can often help bridge some of those linguistic gaps as well.

AD: That's a great point. Thank you.

AD: Now it's going to be everybody else's turn to chime in with some ideas. We'll revisit Farzad on the next slide. Perfect. Continuing with Farzad, you realize that he's likely eligible for asylum. When trying to get more details about his experiences in Afghanistan, he gives one-word answers. For example, when asked why he left Afghanistan, he said, "The Taliban," and didn't give any other information.

Discussion Question

What are some other questions you can ask to draw out more information, or maybe what are things you can do to draw out more information?

AD: We'll jump to the next slide here and we'll go back to our Slido. What do you all participants think? Oh, no. This is the wrong Slido here. Minor technical difficulty. Switchboard host, can you help us?

Producer: Yes, I'm not... Let's see. Hold on a second. See if I can find it.

AD: Our sincerest apologies. You're getting a preview of our next topic in question.

Producer: Let's see. How's that? This is the only other one we're seeing here.

AD: Oh, my word. Okay. That could be an Ashley copying problem. If it's going to come up on here, I guess we'll be okay. Just to reiterate what we—I don't know what the best way to do this is.



Producer: I would encourage through the chat for—as people to provide their feedback through the chat to us, and then you can read it as they go through.

AD: Okay. Apologies for the technology difficulties. Can we go back to the slide that asks the question? Then, yes, participants, I apologize for our Slido issues. If we go back one slide.

Producer: Sorry.

AD: That's okay. Back. Case scenario number two.

Producer: This was the question that we did not want to—

AD: Here we go. Here's a question. Yes, participants, if you can type in the chat, it will just come to myself and to our panelists, but we can read them out loud. Again, so sorry.

When you try to get more details about Farzad's experiences in Afghanistan, he gives one-word answers. For example, when asked why he left Afghanistan, he said, "the Taliban." What are other questions you can ask to draw out more information?

AD: Thank you so much for bearing with us. Oh, chat is disabled. I did not realize that. My sincerest apologies. Okay. I am going to just turn it over to the panel.

HAW: It's on now.

Producer: Actually, I could just pipe up here.

KN: We just enabled it so that way—

AD: Oh, we just enabled it. The chat is open. Kristen, bridge the gap while people start sharing their ideas.

KN: We're talking here about, when we're trying to talk about somebody's experiences in Afghanistan and why they qualify for asylum, part of that is making sure that we're meeting the legal standard for that. That is what happened in Afghanistan? What kind of experience and persecution did you experience? Why are you afraid to go back? Knowing the context of what's going on in Afghanistan is very important. You need to be able to be like, if he says "the Taliban," you have to understand what has happened in Afghanistan over the past 30 years, basically, and more recently over the past two and a half years.

KN: Having that context, saying, "Have you ever encountered the Taliban? What happened when you encountered them? Did they do anything to you? How did you feel when you spoke to them? Did they ever hurt you? Did they ever hurt anybody in your family? Did you ever receive any threats? Did they threaten you by phone? Did they threaten you by letter? Did they come to your house and threaten you? Did they ever physically harm you?" Just asking all these things, all these follow-up questions.

KN: It's pretending like you're doing a very in-depth interview with somebody because you are, but also, you just really want to get down to the very nitty details. You're not necessarily going to put all of that in a declaration or prep them to say all that. You want to have a good understanding and help them have a good understanding of why they left Afghanistan and why they would be afraid to go back.



AD: Thank you, Kristen. I'm hoping everybody can see the chat and see some of these great ideas coming through. One I saw a lot was, "Can you tell me more about that?" Definitely a good follow-up question. Like Kristen said, those more specific questions might help get more specific information.

AD: Then someone shared [something] that I'd like to make sure we all see: "Give personal experiences." Talk about yourself a bit and allow them to get comfortable. Afghan clients need to connect with you on a human-to-human level before being able to truly open up to you. I think that's a good tip for us to keep in mind.

AD: Do any panelists have anything else to add? Oh, no, you can't see the chat, everyone. Oh no. There's a lot—

Producer: Ashley, they can communicate with you, with the panelists, and yourself.

AD: My apologies. A lot of people said, "Can you tell me more about what did you do? What was your work situation? What about the Taliban made you feel like you need to leave? Were you able to work while you were in Afghanistan? Can you tell me why you're afraid? Why are you afraid of the Taliban? Is it on the basis of religion, political affiliation?" Asking some more questions targeted to those topics. The personal experiences that I've already mentioned, asked to be more specific.

AD: Someone had a client in a similar situation, and they said, "I know it can be hard to talk about what you experienced. The more information we have about what happened to you, the better the chance that we can get you help. Is it okay if I ask you more questions?" Then taking a step back and asking those specific questions to build it up.

AD: For [the] panelists, does anyone have anything else to add? Okay, no worries. Still have some great ideas coming through the chat. I apologize. We'll keep moving forward. The next Slido should work, so we should be good there.

Tips for Linguistically Accessible Intakes

AD: Wrapping up this linguistically accessible topic real quick, just some tips, standard tips to take away. Clients may understand questions but may give brief answers without background details. Ask yourself, "What background information do I need?" Plan multiple routes of inquiry to gain necessary information. Then, again, paraphrase to check for mutual understanding. Always make sure that you are understanding what your client's saying and that they are understanding what you're saying.

Communicating Legal Processes

AD: Now we'll jump into our last topic, communicating legal processes. I will jump to Kristen again. Can you share a little bit about how you've done this?

KN: Sure. This builds on being linguistically accessible and being able to speak to people at a level where they're going to understand it. Again, the way I always do it when I am doing an intake with somebody is, I ask them their story, and then I tell them what possibilities there are for them. For most of our Afghan clients, we're talking about asylum. There may be people who are eligible for adjustment of status. There may be people who their only option is TPS. There may be people coming here who came in through the Southern Border, and



really their only option is to go through the removal proceeding process right now, so explaining what we can and cannot do for them is very important. We don't want to give anybody false hope.

KN: Like we mentioned earlier, rumors spread like wildfire for this community—every immigrant community, but the Afghans are very good at telling each other information. It's not always accurate information, and what happened in one case is not always going to be available to another case. It's important to make sure that people understand exactly how the facts of their case affect what can happen to them through the legal process.

KN: One thing that I find very helpful is to make sure that they understand the process in their own language. Working with interpreters here can be very helpful. Even for people who speak some level of English, there are just going to be nuances that may not be easily understood in English, but if accurately translated, can be understood more easily.

KN: It's important to make sure the correct language is used here. Farsi and Dari are mutually intelligible, but they're not entirely the same language. There'll be sometimes Afghans saying, "Oh, yes, I understand Farsi," but they may not have all exactly the same language, so there can be translation errors there.

KN: Another thing I find helpful is to use resources that are in Dari and Pashto. The reason why I say that is that as a legal practitioner, I'm pretty comfortable with everything. I understand everything in English, but being able to give them something in their own language, if they can read or have somebody read it to them, it makes a lot more sense. I can't recommend enough.

KN: Human Rights First has done a lot of translations of very important documents, like the I-589, the asylum application. They give lists of what to bring to asylum interviews, of questions to expect in these asylum interviews, but they also go through family unification, TPS, how to apply for a work authorization, how to apply for humanitarian parole, and then a bunch of "know your rights." If you're a student, what are your rights? If you're working in the U.S., what are your rights? These are all things that are really important. The fact that they have put those into Dari and Pashto is extremely important. If I can give people resources in their own language, I do.

KN: Then just going back to using your clear language, defining everything, bring it back to a very basic level. Then as far as working through the steps, giving them, "This is step one, this is step two, this is step three," organizing things in steps or in bullet points that really breaks it down into how the process is going to happen for them.

AD: Thank you, Kristen. Those are really good points. A couple of people are asking in the chat if a link could be sent to those Dari and Pashto documents. Kristen, if you happen to have that easily accessible, would you mind sharing it? If not, we can make sure to get it to Switchboard to share out with the presentation.

KN: Actually just to interrupt, I have it, I'll drop it in the chat. If people can't see it, then we'll try to figure out a way to send it to everybody.

AD: Okay, perfect. Thank you. Those are all some great tips. Ahmad, I wanted to give you a chance. Do you have any additional thoughts or tips on communicating legal processes to our clients?

[pause]



AO: Thank you so much, Ms. Ashley. I apologize for that. I think the one thing that the communication is most important and I believe giving additional information to the interpreter. Make sure that the interpreter and the client understand each other because we do have several types of dialects in Afghanistan, even with Dari/Farsi and Pashto. This is one important thing that we have an issue most of the time when we are talking with the clients. The first thing that I believe would be better if we ask through the interpreter from the client if they understand the interpreter or not.

AO: If they understand, then we can proceed. If not, if we could have another option to request a different interpreter on the spot for the same dialect, or it would be better if we can ask the client which dialect of Pashto or Dari, okay, but which dialect of Pashto they are speaking because Pashto from some provinces close to Pakistan, like Khost province and Paktia, Paktika, they are totally different, and Wazir Pashto is totally different. Pashto from Southern Afghanistan, they don't understand each other, even they are both speaking Pashto. To make sure the dialect, there's no different dialect speaking between the interpreter and the client, that would be much better.

3. Case Scenario #3

AD: Thank you so much. Now everybody will jump back to Farzad. You already got a preview of this question.

Discussion Question

You mention to Farzad that, based on his intake, you believe he is eligible for asylum. He asks you, "How do we do that?" How do you answer him?

AD: We'll jump back to the Slido. Please use the Slido so that we can make sure everybody can see it. We can all read everyone's feedback. How would you answer Farzad when he wants to know, how do you apply for asylum?

[pause]

AD: Oh, there we go. Use an interpreter, for sure. If you're not a legal professional already and you get the feeling someone could be eligible, definitely refer them to an attorney and make sure the attorney knows what language they need to speak with. Like Kristen explained, maybe having some printouts in their language would be helpful. Use an interpreter that has a legal background if possible. Someone's given us the whole breakdown of how to apply for asylum. I love it. Pull up the instructions from USCIS. Plain language, for sure, for sure. Participants, anything to add?

HAW: I think, importantly, just mentioning the length of time the process can take, because not everyone is automatically eligible for the expedited adjudication. As you've mentioned earlier, the Afghans talk to each other and then that information and the rumor circulates. I think it's important just to be clear for your client in your situation, this is how long we'd expect this to go. These are all the various things that might happen to make your case longer or shorter, that sort of thing.

AD: Definitely. We've got taking small steps to explain the process.



MAM: If I could jump in, just to go off what Harriet is saying, and as mentioned then before, there's patience required on both sides. I believe it would be hard for an applicant to understand the whole process. We don't even understand it sometimes. [chuckles] Saying how long that can take. They're anxious, of course. They're anxious for their families. Then, of course, we on the other side are very busy and want to help as many people as possible as quickly as possible. It doesn't always work that way.

MAM: I'll just say, I recently had a case that took six very long interviews to get from, "I'm afraid of the Taliban," to "The Taliban actually made me sign a document to free me from detention, where I had to admit that if I came back to this certain place, I would be hanged." It took six very long hours or more to get to that point. It's important for the client to know that drawing out that information can take a very long time, because they're oftentimes very reticent in the first or second or, in my case, even fifth interview to get that level of detail. Patience on both sides is crucial to the entire process, I would say.

AD: Definitely. I'm going to keep us moving, just keeping an eye on the time. Thank you, everyone, for your feedback there.

Tips for Communicating Legal Requirements

AD: Again, some general tips on this topic. Start with a basic description of what's being applied for. Clearly explain what clients can and cannot do based on their status. Describe what information is needed to support their application. Then again, use the interpreter and make sure that you are confirming understanding, that your client's understanding you, and that you're understanding them by paraphrasing and just restating what's been discussed.

Q&A Panel

AD: We have a decent amount of time left for some Q&A. There are two questions that have already been shared that I'd like to present to our panelists. If you have a question that you haven't asked, please use the Q&A, submit your question, and we will do our best to get it answered. The first one came pretty early on. It says,

[What are some good resources for Afghan clients who are learning to read and write English? Just wondering if you have come across anything that might be helpful for clients and that would, of course, help your communication with them.](#)

KN: I know for me, since I come from a refugee background, I work with the services agencies, both resettlement and then people who step in after resettlement services. Almost all these social services agencies have some sort of funding that allows them to do ESL, English as a second language. Getting people enrolled in those, and for most of these people, because they receive public benefits in some form, they are eligible to take these classes for free through the social services agencies.

KN: If those aren't available in their area, I would check with local libraries. They often do. As somebody points out, yes, adult education always has English as a second language, so look for a community college or any sort of educational center that does that sort of thing. Sometimes if you look at alternative high schools, they will often let people who are adults enroll to take English classes there. That is something that can be done. They'll listen to Afghan music and Afghan TV and things like that, but they should try listening to some English TV,



English music, things like that. That's just a way to hear the words repeated more in a context that people use it every day. Those are things that I suggest.

KN: Then *USA Learns*. I have not looked at that, but Ashley Huber here says it's a good website. I recommend that people check it out. I'm going to check it out myself.

AD: Thank you, Kristen. Thank you. There's another example in the chat. It's just to us, so I'll read it. "Encourage community partners to be responsive to needs of Afghans and other immigrant groups, for example, hosting English classes at places of employment."

AD: Another question that we have,

[Is there a way to speak persuasively to an Afghan with a failed SIV application to apply for asylum, even though he has a strong and valid asylum case?](#)

AD: I know we don't want to give specific legal advice, but are there any tips here on how we can better communicate the pros and cons of different statuses?

MAM: I'm sorry, I don't know the answer to this question, and I'm hoping to learn myself. [chuckles]

KN: Sure, I can jump in on what I would do in this situation. If I have somebody that comes to me and they have multiple avenues—like I have had people who are eligible for SIV, eligible for asylum, eligible for TPS—the important thing, I think, here is to talk about timing and what's going to be most advantageous for them. In the case of somebody who has a failed SIV application, we have to see where they're at in the process. Do they need to seek a new COM approval? Do they need to appeal a COM approval? These are all things that can take a lot of time—especially right now COM approvals, there's just thousands of them out there for the Chief of Mission approval for SIV, so people don't know that.

KN: It takes a long time. They don't have enough staff. They're working very hard on it, but it's going to take a long time to get an application either appealed and put back in place or to do a new application. Explaining to them that with asylum, if you came here through the OAW/OAR evacuation process, asylum—you are eligible for expedited asylum. You're going to have your interview very quickly. You're probably going to have a decision made on that asylum case, hopefully, fingers crossed, before you would ever get your new COM approval.

KN: Explaining, "This is how it's going to be advantageous to you. This is how it changes your outlook." Obviously, if you are eligible for SIV, you get it and you adjust your status. You get your green card right away. With asylum, you have to do two steps. You have to win your asylum and then you have to apply for a green card. That can take a little bit longer there. It gets you to a more permanent and safe status sooner. You can also emphasize how that affects their ability to apply for benefits in the United States. Having asylum gives you benefits basically indefinitely, so if you lose a job or if you have a large family to support, sometimes it's very important to have.

KN: Then just explaining timelines, explaining how you get to the same result no matter what. That's that. You also have to keep in mind when you're working with a client that ultimately it's their case. You can explain all the pros and cons of everything, and if they say, "No, I want to go through SIV, I want to go through SIV," that's their case. That's what they get to go through.



KN: Then I see your follow-up. Pride seems to be a big block for those who work with the U.S. military. You can also explain to them that they can get asylum having worked with the U.S. military. That is a particular social group that is immutable. They cannot change the fact that they worked for the U.S. Army or the U.S. military. That is perfectly valid grounds to get asylum. They still get to the same point. They still get to tell their story. That, having the SIV designation doesn't matter. It's just the designation. It doesn't matter as far as what their ultimate goals are. It's not going to keep them from getting to where they want to get to. If that makes sense. [laughs]

AD: Thank you. No, thank you very much. I do want to just restate that we are focusing on the topic at hand today. We're not talking about specific legal options, and we can't help people with their cases in this webinar, unfortunately. So just making sure that all of our expectations are set appropriately.

AD: We had two. I don't know where the one went, but we had questions in the chat. Ideas how to explain to the men that it is important that they get and keep a job prior to quitting and expecting DSHS to provide all their funds.

AD: Within that, there's another question about gender roles in health care situations.

Women need health care, but their father or brother insists on accompanying them or speaking for them. Maybe, Ahmad, do you have any ideas on how we can work with men in those situations?

AO: Yes, Ms. Ashley. I already put something in the chat as well to reply to that question. The better way is to involve the medical provider on that situation, and they should already explain about the HIPAA rules, which is based on the HIPAA rules. There is not allowed any other person to be involved in their medical questionnaire or their medical exam when the provider—it should be only provider and the patient. Unless we need to get an authorization from the patient, and then they can speak on behalf of the patient.

AD: Thank you.

How might we explain to men that it is important that they get and keep a job prior to quitting and expecting DSHS to provide all their funds?

AD: Do you have any thoughts on that or anyone else?

KN: I guess my thought there would be to—you'd almost have to rely on your cultural stereotypes there and your gender stereotypes to be in a point—this is a culture where it's male-dominant. You can talk about how this is your opportunity to provide for your family. You're going to get more funds working than you will from DSHS. If you have an ultimate goal of having a car or buying a house, moving to a community with other Afghans around, you need to have the funds to do that, and you're not going to have that with any sort of public benefits you're getting.

KN: It's a matter of taking care of your family and that there are lots of opportunities here in the U.S. where you're going to earn more income than you would have back home. This is your chance to make a really wonderful life for yourself and your family. That would be my tactic on how to explain to a father or husband about why it's important to keep a job in the United States.



AD: Thank you. I don't see any other questions in our Q&A, so just a last call in a way because we are coming up to two o'clock Eastern. If you have a question for our panelists, please type it in now. We did prepare a couple of questions that I would like to ask, so back to you, Ahmad. We talked about a lot here today,

What do you think the number one thing to keep in mind is when we're working with Afghan clients?

AO: Thank you so much, Ms. Ashley. Again, as I mentioned earlier, by giving additional information to the interpreter or, in another word, a short briefing about the client to the interpreter, and make sure you do have an interpreter to eliminate the language barrier, we would be able to achieve that goal.

AD: Thank you. Harriet, I think that there was a tip or a suggestion that you had wanted to share today, and I want to make sure we give you the space to do that.

HAW: Yes, sure. Thank you, Ashley. This is a follow-up to my "Let's use technology to communicate if we can." When I've had clients who do not read or write even in their own language, that can be quite challenging for some of us who are just not—you're going to have to get creative. The way that I overcame this situation was using WhatsApp. A lot of Afghan clients are more comfortable using WhatsApp because, for anyone who is tech-minded, it's end-to-end encrypted, so it cannot be hacked. The Taliban cannot see what you're exchanging with your client, and I think that can be very worrying for them, especially if they're coming out of that very negative situation. They may be afraid that their communications can be reviewed by foreign governments.

HAW: I use the voice note in WhatsApp, and I would be able to basically tell my client, "Hey, this is what we discussed today. These are the next steps I need you to take. Here's what we're going to need to do to prepare for your interview," or "I've sent an Uber to collect you," those sorts of things. As their English became better, sometimes they would be able to respond to me directly. Other times they would have a friend or a family member who spoke English communicate with me or explain to them what I'd said.

HAW: Again, I think that's just finding different ways to get around some of the barriers that we have when our clients cannot read or write even in their native language.

AD: Thank you. A question came through in the chat, and this will have to be our last one, unfortunately. It says,

I'm in a unique situation as I work at a school, but I wonder how you navigate conflict with men who do not want to work with women.

AD: Again, those gender differences, difficulties, whatever you want to call it. Any final tips for that, any one of our participants or panelists?

AO: Ms. Ashley, in that case, if it is a school, it depends if it is the students in a high school or middle school, a better way to explain this situation with their parents and explain to their parents that they need to explain it to their children.

AD: Okay. Mary Ann, Harriet, Kristen, do you have anything to add to this situation or just the general male and female? Oh, the parents are the ones who don't want to talk to the women in the school. More specific tips.

HAW: I don't know that this is a tip, but I think coming from a Western culture, we have to be very aware that, we have to empathize to a point, with the others, with people coming from, a Middle Eastern background. It is



so different. I think sometimes we just have to remember to put ourselves in their shoes and recognize why perhaps they have those feelings and do our very best to come at it from that direction. I don't know that I have an answer, but I think that would be how I try and approach it.

AD: Thank you, Harriet.

AO: Also, Ms. Ashley, probably that family may have a social worker or a case manager for sure. Because they're receiving all the benefits through the social worker, case manager, so the better way to reach out to them or, in another word, resettlement agencies.

AD: Okay, yes, looping in their other service providers. Thank you. Thank you, everyone.

Conclusion

Recommended Resources

AD: We do have to keep moving because we've got less than two minutes left. If we can jump back to the slides. These will come out to you in the follow-up, but some recommended resources: Cultural Orientation Resource Exchange has an Afghan Cultural Backgrounder, which is very informative. Switchboard has a five-part series, Cultural and Practical Considerations for Working with Afghan Clients, that can also give a bit more background. Center for Immigration Studies: Immigrant Literacy, Self-Assessment versus Reality, just a little bit more about the literacy component. Then IU School of Medicine: Information About Our Afghan Community. Again, that will give you a general overview of that.

Reviewing Learning Objectives

AD: Hopefully, now that we're at the end of this session, you have learned how to name strategies for conducting efficient culturally appropriate intakes for potential Afghan clients with low literacy levels, communicate more clearly with Afghan clients about the requirements for immigration benefits, and ask linguistically accessible questions to gather information from Afghan clients in order to prepare their cases.

Feedback Survey

AD: We need you to bring your phone back out again, please, and help us to help you scan the QR code or click the link in the chat to access our feedback survey. It's five questions, 60 seconds, and it helps us to improve future training and technical assistance. The link's in the chat, and you will also find it in the follow-up emails. I still think I'm seeing some tips coming in the chat, so make sure you're glancing at that as well.

[silence]

Stay Connected

AD: Then it is two o'clock, so we should probably jump to our very last slide. Staying connected for more training and technical assistance, stay connected with Switchboard. Email us at switchboard@rescue.org. Visit us at www.switchboardta.org. Follow us on social media @switchboardta.



AD: On behalf of all of us at Switchboard, thank you for learning with us, and we hope to see you again soon. Thank you all for being here.

The IRC received competitive funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant #90RB0052 and Grant #90RB0053. The project is 100% financed by federal funds. The contents of this document are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.