



Office of
International
Education

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Immigration Attorneys – Recommendations from OIE

Explanation

Locating a good immigration attorney is important. You will likely spend considerable time and money working with your attorney. As with any important decision, do your research, and make an educated choice.

Immigration law is complex and changes frequently. Attorneys, also called “lawyers,” are trained in graduate school and licensed by states to practice law. Most attorneys select an area of specialization such as immigration, patents, wills and probate, or litigation. An immigration lawyer should have a thorough understanding of laws and procedures that pertain to non-US citizens. A good attorney who specializes in immigration law will present you with the legal options that are available to you and can correctly prepare and file immigration petitions.

When Should You Hire An Immigration Attorney?

Hiring a competent immigration attorney can help you avoid unnecessary processing delays and many hours of work interpreting Department of Homeland Security procedures, and preparing paperwork and petitions. Attorneys are regularly involved in H-1B petitions for “special occupation workers,” O applications for “persons of extraordinary ability,” and for employment-based permanent residency (“green card”) applications. A lawyer should also be consulted if you have a complicated situation which is beyond the regular scope of your OIE advisor.

There are many situations where a person can successfully file a petition with the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) without the help of an immigration attorney. A family-based permanent residency application (i.e. based on marriage to a US citizen) is one such example. If you decide to file a petition on your own, you may want to pay for an initial consultation with a qualified lawyer to get you started. You must become completely informed about the procedures and requirements of your particular petition type and be prepared to begin early to allow ample time for each step of the process. Begin by visiting the USCIS website (www.uscis.gov) to find forms and general information.

How to Find an Immigration Attorney

1. **American Immigration Lawyer’s Association (AILA) Immigration Lawyer Referral Service.** www.aila.org
AILA is a national bar association of over 7,500 attorneys who practice immigration law. To access the AILA referral Service, use the web-based search, call 800-954-0254, or email ilrs@aila.org. Give your name, location, and the reason you need an immigration lawyer. You will be given the contact information of a local lawyer who specializes in your area of need. When you contact the lawyer, mention that you used the AILA Immigration Lawyer Referral Service and ask about their “initial consultation fee.”
2. **Allegheny County Bar Association.** The Allegheny County Bar Association also offers a lawyer referral service. There is a \$25.00 fee for the service at www.acba.org or call 412-261-5555.
3. **American Bar Association (ABA).** For general information about the legal system and hiring an attorney, visit the ABA website at www.abanet.org/public.html.
4. **Friends and Colleagues.** As an international student or scholar, you may know someone who previously used the services of an immigration attorney. Seek out the informed opinions of friends and colleagues to obtain the attorney’s name and contact information, the type of petition filed, and your friend’s level of satisfaction.
5. **Yellow Pages.** Check the Yellow Pages of the phone book, or www.yellowpages.com and type “attorneys.”

Questions to Ask Before You Hire an Immigration Attorney

How long has the attorney been practicing immigration law; how much work is immigration related?

Find an attorney who does all or most of his/her work in immigration law.

How much experience does the attorney have in your particular type of immigration case?

Will the attorney offer an initial consultation before you hire him/her to take your case?

If so, be sure to find out how much the consultation will cost and how long will it be.

How will you contact the attorney?

Is he/she accessible via cell phone, email, or office phone?

Who will be handling the details of your case?

Will you contact the attorney or a paralegal with questions? What is training, experience of the paralegal?

Who will choose the attorney and pay the legal fees for an employment-based petition?

In employment-based cases, the employer may make the choice about which attorney will be used. The employer may designate either an “in-house” attorney or immigration specialist who works for the company or an outside attorney who will be paid a fee by the employer. In some cases, the employer pays, and in some cases the fee is split between employee and employer. An employment-based petition will involve you, the employer, and the attorney. Even if the employer pays the fees, you are also the attorney’s client. Do not be bashful about asking questions and talking to the attorney about the progress and details of your petition.

How much will it cost to hire the attorney for your case?

Rates vary significantly based on geographic location, your specific situation, and other factors. Be sure to ask *before* the work begins what the costs will be. In the Pittsburgh area, an H-1B petition costs \$1,500 to \$3,000 and a permanent residency (“green card” or “immigrant”) petition can cost \$5,000 to \$7,000.

Will you be charged a flat rate, or an hourly rate? If it is a flat rate, what services does the flat rate include?

For example, if an initial petition is denied, will an appeal be included in the flat rate?

Will you pay before (“up front”) or after services have been rendered?

If you pay *before* services are provided, how will you be assured that your case will remain a priority?

Special Issues for Employees of Carnegie Mellon University

Foreign nationals who are employed by Carnegie Mellon in H-1B or O status or who are (or will be) permanent residents of the US may need to consult an attorney. OIE processes H-1B applications for the majority of international researchers, professors, scholars, and staff and an attorney is not involved. However, H-1B employees who work for certain departments - Computer Science, Robotics, Software Engineering Institute, and the Tepper School - as well as all persons seeking O status or permanent residency must consult with their departments and use an attorney who has been pre-approved by Carnegie Mellon to for such work. An “employment-based petition” such as H-1B and some petitions for permanent residency are based on the strength of your professional and educational background and your job in the US.

All Carnegie Mellon employees who are interested in becoming permanent residents of the US (also called resident aliens, immigrants, and “green card” holders) must work with an attorney since OIE does not handle permanent resident applications. Please note that no matter who pays or who chooses the attorney, Carnegie Mellon, the department, *and* the individual will be involved in working with the attorney for a successful employment-based permanent residency petition.

Before seeking legal advice from one of the pre-approved attorneys (below), a Carnegie Mellon employee must discuss the plan with the department and receive confirmation that the department will support you.

The following attorneys are pre-approved to handle employment-based H-1B, O, and permanent resident applications on behalf of Carnegie Mellon employees:

Attorney Name	Law Firm Name	Phone	Email	Website
John Brendel Larry Lebowitz	Cohen & Grigsby, P.C.	412-297-4987 412-297-4979	jbrendel@cohenlaw.com llebowitz@cohenlaw.com	www.cohenlaw.com
Robert S. Whitehill	Fox Rothschild, LLP	412-394-5595	rwhitehill@foxrothschild.com	www.foxrothschild.com
H. Ronald Klasko	Klasko, Rulon, Stock & Seltzer, LLP	215-825-8608	rklasko@klaskolaw.com	www.klaskolaw.com