

Final IHRP Report Summer 2025

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Experience Summary:

This summer at the Canada-US Border Rights Clinic, I supported hundreds of asylum seekers navigating the Safe Third Country Agreement. From conducting intakes and drafting legal opinions to spearheading supporting clients in detention and advancing AI-driven access-to-justice tools, I combined legal research, advocacy, and innovation to help reunite families and protect rights. Witnessing clients' resilience deepened my commitment to immigration justice and affirmed my belief in pairing compassion with legal skill to create ripples of safety and dignity across borders.

Written Report:

Introduction

This summer, I had the incredible privilege and opportunity of working at the Canada-US Border Rights Clinic, directly supporting hundreds of migrants. This specialized immigration law clinic supports people in the United States who have claimed asylum there and now want to claim asylum in Canada for various reasons. Most importantly, because of the Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA) that governs the Canada-US border, only migrants who meet one of the few exceptions to the STCA can even attempt to cross the border. The most common exceptions are having a blood relative in Canada, other than a cousin, or being considered stateless.

I was drawn to this work after supporting an Afghan refugee family's resettlement outside of law school and knew the experience would be rewarding. While I was familiar with the process once in Canada, I was unaware of how valuable legal support is to people trying to make an asylum claim when they have close access to Canada. I was able to contribute to many ongoing projects at the clinic and also spearhead new ones.

Client Management

Throughout my term, I conducted intake interviews, hearing migrants' stories in their own words, prepared their files for lawyers to review, and began drafting legal opinion letters for them to take to the border after receiving legal advice. I conducted interviews after clients crossed the border to learn more about what actually happens there and documented my findings for systemic advocacy conversations with the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA). I became an expert in DNA evidence after one of our many clients had a lab test

rejected by CBSA and, after extensive research, wrote a response to the officer who made the decision. This type of oral and written advocacy, backed by strong legal research skills, felt like the perfect alignment of my values and abilities.

However, not all of our clients' stories are happy ones. Under the current US administration, when someone tries to claim asylum in Canada and is not admitted, they are returned to the US, often with no valid status, and placed in an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention centre. I spearheaded my clinic's response to supporting these clients in detention, connecting with our cross-border network colleagues based in the US, who sometimes visited the clients in person and supported them in their US deportation proceedings. This project turned out to be much larger than I had anticipated, given the difficulty of speaking with detained clients in another country. Nonetheless, I conducted four intake interviews and prepared client files so our lawyers could provide support. I was glad to smooth the path for the clinic team to continue assisting detained clients in the future.

Technological Advancements in the Field

Since this position was fully virtual, the clinic embraced technology entirely. While the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in providing legal service is highly contested, and not without environmental impact, it was a helpful tool in my work this summer, especially in communicating with clients around the globe in more than 10 languages. While we had a contract with a traditional translation service for live interpretation during meetings, I used an AI translation tool to write emails, schedule meetings, and decode documents from unfamiliar jurisdictions.

I also supported the clinic's technological expansion by helping train a new AI chatbot to conduct our initial client intake process. When someone emailed us interested in receiving legal support, we had to determine if they were currently in the US, whether they met any of the exceptions to the STCA, and whether their Canadian relative had the correct status to be an anchor relative for their claim. At present, this process involves sending a long, two-page email full of legal information that, like any lengthy message, clients may skim or miss key details. Some who truly need our support may be deterred by the format or fail to respond after missing important information.

The clinic has been collaborating with a university in the southern US that builds AI models to support organizations increasing access to justice at both the southern and northern US borders. I developed many sample conversations, with all confidential information removed, to train the model to handle intakes instead of requiring significant human labour. This model will improve the process by presenting questions one at a time, helping

clients determine whether they meet any STCA exceptions. Once complete, it will be able to flag key issues and generate a report for the team to follow up on. I had not previously considered the connection between technology and the promotion of human rights, but I am grateful to have been exposed to it early on as the sector continues to grow.

Personal Reflections

In addition to these projects, I completed a legal research assignment for a migrant justice non-governmental organization, created materials for public legal education presentations, and drafted access-to-information requests for our clients. Still, what stands out most to me is how this work touched my heart.

When I began telling people about my summer job, I often heard warnings about the difficult stories I would encounter and advice to prepare myself. While I did hear many hard stories, I was also privileged to witness some of the most resilient, generous, and compassionate people I have ever met. I believe anyone working in this area of immigration law is changed by it.

One client I supported was featured in a CBC article after attempting to irregularly cross the border during the Canadian winter. When intercepted by RCMP officers, he required the amputation of three fingers. For many of our clients, the current US administration deports them to third countries which are nations they are not originally from and that is often after decades of building a life in the US. This happens without their input. It is heartbreaking to hear of clients who qualify for a STCA exception but lack the documents to satisfy CBSA. It is euphoric when we hear about clients crossing successfully and reuniting with their families. Still, every email, consultation, and presentation feels like a small ripple toward giving people the support they need to keep themselves and their loved ones safe.

I will carry this work with me throughout my career and life. The clinic, like many justice-seeking organizations, places strong emphasis on the mental health of its students, staff, and clients. We often discussed the difficulty of delivering unwanted news to families or being unable to help someone in desperate circumstances. I found that caring for my own well-being allowed me to better serve our clients, and I never felt overwhelmed by the work.

Each morning before opening my laptop, I reflected on how I was feeling and how I wanted to show up in my work that day. The sentiment that stayed with me most was immense gratitude for the chance to walk alongside these clients, even briefly, during their long and difficult journeys, and for the privilege of being born in Canada.

While I believe the lessons from this summer will continue to unfold with time, I know that my heart is larger, and my legal skill set broader for having been part of the Canada-US Border Rights Clinic.