

# GRF LEGAL COMMUNITY PLEDGE MATCHING PORTAL GUIDE

FREE LEGAL HELP FOR THOSE WORKING  
WITH FORCIBLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## Pro Bono and the Global Refugee Forum Legal Community Pledge

Readily available legal assistance is fundamental to responding to the needs of forcibly displaced people. Yet, far too often, refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons, and other forcibly displaced people (“refugees and others forcibly displaced”) are unable to access the legal support they need. Free legal help provided by the private sector, known as ‘pro bono’ legal assistance, can help refugees and others forcibly displaced to access essential legal assistance. It can also help the civil society organizations that work with them with their own legal needs, allowing these organizations to use resources which would otherwise be spent on legal costs, for programs directly meeting the needs of refugees and others forcibly displaced.

At the inaugural Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in December 2019, private legal actors that joined the [“Mobilizing the Global Legal Community to Protect and Find Solutions for Refugees and Others Forcibly Displaced”](#) pledge - commonly known as the GRF Legal Community Pledge - committed to provide over 127,000 hours of free legal services (‘pro bono’) every year to support efforts to protect and find solutions for refugees and others forcibly displaced.

## PILnet and the Matching Portal

PILnet, together with a ‘Core Group’ of NGOs and individual researchers and scholars from the refugee sector, support coordination of the GRF pledge.



As part of these efforts, Core Group members have devised a matching portal, managed by PILnet, through which requests for pro bono legal assistance can be received, assessed and matched with the pro bono hours committed by the signatories to the pledge. The matching portal aims to ensure that organizations working with refugees and others forcibly displaced are aware that free legal assistance can be sought and that access to this assistance is accessible, fair, and equitable.

These guidelines outline the scope of the matching portal and how it operates, including detailing the general process for receiving, assessing, and referring requests for legal assistance. Finally, it provides information about how PILnet seeks to facilitate successful matches.

## 2. SCOPE OF THE MATCHING PORTAL

### Scope of the Matching Portal

The matching portal aims to respond to requests for pro bono assistance that address the unmet legal needs of refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons, and other forcibly displaced persons as well as the legal needs of civil society organizations that work with them. More specifically, PILnet accepts requests in the following fields:

- **Individual case matters** - Such as family reunification applications, representation or other support for strategic litigation in higher, regional or international courts, support for interventions with UN bodies, country of origin information or legal research.
- **Organizational legal support** - Such as assistance with registration of the organization and preparing relevant documents (e.g. articles of association), legal support relating to conflicts with various stakeholders, review of commercial contracts, assistance with drafting of employment contracts, internship/volunteer agreements, or other issues related to residence/work permits of staff.
- **Legal training** - Including training for NGOs and paralegals on certain non-asylum areas of law (such as business law, criminal law, SGBV response) or legal-practice related skills (such as negotiation and mediation of disputes).
- **Other legal research** - Including country-level, multi-jurisdictional and/or comparative research on a given issue affecting refugees or others forcibly displaced (e.g. detention, deportation processes, legal aid).

For more information about the specific types of requests that PILnet can respond to please see the [Menu of Pro Bono Options](#).

### 3. WHO CAN SUBMIT REQUESTS

The matching portal is open to all civil-society organizations, associations, clinics, legal service providers and other entities that work with forcibly displaced communities. You need not be a signatory to the GRF Legal Community Pledge to make a request and requests from refugee-led organizations are particularly welcomed.

Unfortunately, at this time, PILnet cannot accept requests directly from refugees or others forcibly displaced. Requests for legal assistance for individual cases need to be made by an entity, such as a local legal aid provider, community-based organization or other civil society actor working with refugees and others forcibly displaced, that is familiar with the local context and applicable legal framework. If refugees or others forcibly displaced people are in need of legal assistance, they should first contact a local legal aid provider to discuss their legal needs.

To find a local legal aid provider please refer to the country pages of [UNHCR Help](#) or [Rights in Exile](#). If the local legal aid provider requires additional support in addressing your legal needs they can make a request for legal assistance through the Matching Portal.

*The matching portal is open to all civil society organizations [...] working with forcibly displaced persons.*



*Requests from refugee-led organizations are particularly welcomed.*

# 4. PROCEDURES FOR SUBMITTING A REQUEST

## I. Formulating a Request

We encourage submitting parties to prepare a preliminary request for legal assistance that they can discuss with PILnet. This preliminary request does not have to be finalized but ideally should include an overview of the issue and the main needs of the submitting party.

If the submitting party has trouble with formulating the request or is unsure about certain aspects, the [NGO Pro Bono Toolkit: Top Tips for Developing a Successful Pro Bono Project](#) and the [Menu of Pro Bono Options](#) are a good place to start. Or the submitting party can set up a meeting with PILnet to discuss their legal needs. This initial meeting can be helpful to:

- Field preliminary questions about the referral matching portal;
- Discuss future steps and how PILnet will proceed with the request;
- Manage expectations regarding the matching process and results;
- Lay down groundwork for overcoming obstacles, in case they arise in the matching process or in any other future stages; and
- Ask any additional questions about the request.



PILnet encourages and welcomes interested parties to [contact us](#) directly to discuss their preliminary request.

## II. Submitting a Request for Pro Bono Assistance

After the preliminary request has been discussed and prepared, the submitting party can submit their request directly to PILnet through its [In-take Form](#) which is publicly available online. The in-take form asks the submitting party to include the following information:

- The name, address, and contact details of the submitting party;
- The contact details of the main point of contact at the submitting party who will be responsible for liaising with PILnet;
- A brief overview of the need(s) that the request seeks to address;
- Additional information about the nature of the project; and
- Any time constraints pertaining to the request.

# 5. PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

Based on this information PILnet will undertake an assessment of whether or not it can take the matter on for matching.

Once the intake form has been received and reviewed, PILnet will directly contact the submitting party to share the outcome of the assessment of their request. Usually, this process takes between 2-4 working days.

Usually, PILnet will relay one of two possible outcomes: 1) the request cannot be responded to and should be referred to another body where possible; or 2) in principle, the request falls within the scope of the matching portal, and can proceed forward.

## I. The Request Falls Outside the Scope of the Matching Portal

If the request does not correspond to any one of the fields of the matching portal or is otherwise outside of the scope of the matching portal (e.g. it is referred by an individual not an organization), PILnet will notify the submitting party that they cannot respond to their request. In this case, PILnet may ask the submitting party if they could consider modifying the request.

Alternatively, where possible, PILnet will provide details for or directly refer the submitting party to a body that may be able to respond to the request. It may be the case that specialized legal clinics or NGOs may be better positioned to respond, in which case PILnet will notify the submitting party.

## II. Work With PILnet to Prepare Pro Bono Request

If the request falls within the scope of the matching portal, PILnet will complete a detailed [project description](#) for the request. If the request does not include enough information or is missing any other components, PILnet can work with the submitting party to refine the scope of the request. This may be particularly relevant to requests concerning more in-depth or jurisdictional projects rather than requests concerning individual case matters. In such cases, PILnet can carry out consultations with the submitting party in order to further refine and shape the request.

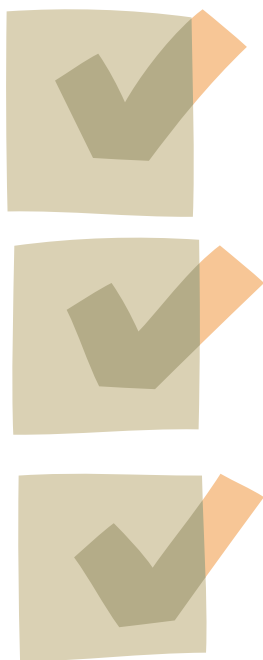
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In all cases, PILnet understands the pro bono abilities and interests of the signatories and can help the submitting party define the assistance they need in language that signatories can respond to.

In particular, PILnet can encourage submitting parties to:

- Request help that is achievable, with clearly defined time commitments, deadlines, and desired result(s);
- Ensure that the type of help sought is legal in nature, and refers to the type of legal expertise needed; and
- Group and separate requests for help where appropriate. It is possible to work with multiple law firms on different pro bono projects at the same time, and this can help submitting parties disperse resources to meet competing priorities and timelines.

The submitting parties can also use this opportunity to discuss with PILnet any concerns it may have in relation to the sensitivity or urgency of the matter. PILnet can develop a mutually agreed upon strategy for matching the request.



## 6. REQUEST IS READY TO BE MATCHED

Finally, after the project description is prepared in collaboration with the submitting party, PILnet will proceed with matching the request. Before doing so, PILnet will seek explicit permission from the submitting party to circulate their request in one or more of the ways outlined below. They will also discuss the level of anonymity that should be maintained during the matching process. Once PILnet and the submitting party have come to an agreement, PILnet will proceed with the matching process.



## 7. PROCEDURES FOR MATCHING LEGAL ASSISTANCE REQUESTS

PILnet will use a variety of approaches to find a suitable respondent to each request that is approved. It is anticipated that PILnet will seek to find a respondent to each request for a period of at least three months.

PILnet will keep the the submitting party regularly updated regarding the matching process. If the request is not matched within three months, PILnet will speak with the submitting party to discuss how to proceed. PILnet may suggest that the submitting party modify or amend the request, it may propose continuing to circulate the request, or it may offer to temporarily pause the matching process and resume at a later time. In any case, if a match is not secured within three months, PILnet will directly speak with the submitting party to determine what is the most suitable way to proceed.

### I. MATCHING THROUGH MAILING LISTS

In many cases, PILnet will circulate requests through a specialized newsletter, which is sent directly to a mailing list of parties that signed onto the pledge. PILnet will include the key details about the request and will generally include the name of the submitting party as well as its website, although the request can be fully anonymized if this is preferred. Where appropriate, PILnet may also circulate matters in PILnet's other clearinghouse newsletters within the region or at a global level.



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## II. MATCHING THROUGH PUBLIC EVENTS

In other instances, PILnet can circulate the request through public events, including seminars, roundtables, and other events that it organizes. This may be particularly helpful in those instances where PILnet has organized a specialist roundtable with lawyers who can respond to a request that specifically pertains to their area of expertise or to the issue being discussed. In such instances, PILnet will circulate the request in written format via e-mail to the attendees of the event.

## III. DIRECT MATCHING

PILnet will frequently seek to match a request by directly approaching law firms on behalf of the submitting party instead of, or in addition to, circulating the request. PILnet may pursue this option in situations where:

- The matter is urgent and cannot wait until newsletters are circulated or until responses are collected from newsletters;
- The matter is sensitive and requires treatment of the utmost confidentiality;
- The matter requires a lawyer with very specialized expertise and/or skillsets; and/or
- The matter has already been circulated in several newsletters and a more personal approach is required to find a suitable match.

In taking one or multiple of the above approaches, PILnet will always be guided by the submitting party and any concerns that it may have. PILnet will aim to customize its approach to best suit the needs of the submitting party to ensure that the request is handled with the care, confidentiality, and attentiveness that it requires.

## IV. SCREENING RESPONSES

After circulating the request, PILnet expects that it will receive responses from respondents who are able to assist. PILnet will vet all expressions of interest on behalf of submitting parties.

PILnet undertakes this process in order to remove the administrative burdens of holding a preliminary discussion between the respondent and the submitting party. By acting as the intermediary, PILnet can protect the identity of the submitting party, if that is a concern, or the identity of the submitting party's client. Furthermore, PILnet can field sensitive questions on their behalf.

Where multiple expressions of interest are received from respondents, PILnet will rank the expressions of interest according to a range of criteria as a way to identify the most suitable respondent.

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The criteria may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Expertise and experience as relevant to the legal matter;
- Whether a prior existing working relationship exists between the submitting party and the respondent;
- Location and reach of the respondent, as relevant to the submitting party and the legal matter;
- Skillsets on offer by the respondent, such as prior experience with similar types of legal matter, language skills, or cultural knowledge;
- Distribution of matters amongst respondents (particularly of law firms);
- Whether the respondent has signed the GRF Legal Community Pledge; and,
- Where appropriate, relevant experience of the respondent.

Based on this assessment, PILnet can create a shortlist, and where possible or requested, PILnet can share this list with the submitting party to choose the most suitable respondent. Once a respondent is chosen they will be approached and asked to conduct a conflict check.

### Conducting a Conflict Check

Conflict checks are an important part of a lawyer's ethical practice, and PILnet ensures that conflict checks are conducted in every pro bono match it facilitates. Lawyers owe a range of ethical duties to their past and present clients, including to those that they provide free legal services to. To ensure that these duties are not breached, ethical lawyers conduct a conflict check before taking on every new client. Essentially, this means that they check their list of past and present clients, and make sure that there is no ethical reason holding them back from acting for the new client. PILnet is committed to cultivating shared ethical pro bono legal practices globally.



To perform a conflict check, PILnet will provide the firm with:

- The legal name of the submitting party;
- If applicable, the registration details of the submitting party, such as a charity and/or non-profit organization;
- The name of the submitting party's main contact person;
- The name of the individual that the submitting party is supporting; and
- If needed other information and documents such a list of the Board of Directors, copies of ID cards or passports for the contact person and Directors, articles of association etc.

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PILnet will always seek explicit consent from the submitting party before providing law firms with any confidential information, such as personal details, for the purpose of conflict check. If a refugee-led organization or other community based organization has not been legally incorporated or has other problems with providing the information requested, PILnet will discuss this with the legal service provider to determine a suitable way forward.

NGOs will always be able to dictate the terms under which the authority is given. For example:

- A submitting party may authorize PILnet to provide information to a law firm for the purpose of a conflict check once an expression of interest is received. In this case, PILnet will simply ask the law firm to conduct a conflict check.
- In other cases, a submitting party may ask PILnet to consult it once expressions of interest have been received, so that the NGO can conduct its own vetting process. In this case, the submitting party would have authorized PILnet to circulate information on the mailing list, but the terms of that authority prevent PILnet from releasing further information without consulting the NGO.

## VI. SIGNING ENGAGEMENT LETTER

Finally, once the respondent and the submitting party have met and have confirmed that they would like to work together, they should draft an engagement letter. Where required or appropriate, PILnet can assist with drafting or finalizing the letter. In this way, the terms of engagement will be formalized and agreed upon by both parties before they proceed with their collaboration.



Depending on the case/project and whether it is helpful, PILnet can be present at the first meeting to facilitate confirmation of the scope of the request and to ensure that there is a shared understanding of the project parameters. PILnet's presence during the first meeting will be determined on an individual case basis, as it may be appropriate for PILnet to be present in some meetings (e.g. where a law firm and the submitting party have never previously collaborated together) and not others (e.g. where the law firm and submitting party have extensively collaborated together before).

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## V. PILNET FACILITATES MATCH

PILnet will directly, via e-mail, introduce the submitting party to the top respondent once the match is confirmed by both parties and the conflict check is completed. PILnet will then set-up an introductory virtual meeting between the submitting party and the respondent.

It is very important that both parties are clear about their expectations and the relevant roles and responsibilities, at the outset of entering into a pro bono partnership, especially if the project is more complex. This introductory meeting provides a valuable space to raise any outstanding questions and concerns and to clarify how the project will be implemented in practice.

Open communication is essential for successful pro bono partnerships and the introductory meeting is a good first step in developing a relationship where both parties can openly raise concerns and questions. For more tips on how to implement a successful pro bono project and what issues may wish to be discussed at the introductory meeting please see: [NGO Pro Bono Toolkit: Top Tips for Developing a Successful Pro Bono Project.](#)



## 8. FOLLOW UP

PILnet is committed to matching high-quality legal assistance and to supporting the development of impactful pro bono projects which address the legal needs of refugees and others forcibly displaced, or the organizations that work with them.

After the introductory meeting, PILnet's ongoing involvement will be determined on an individual case basis, including taking into consideration the views and capacity of all parties. At the introductory meeting, the parties will agree when PILnet should next follow-up with both parties to ensure that the match is going smoothly. PILnet is also available in the interim to assist both sides should any issues arise while the collaboration is on-going. The level of engagement will be contingent upon the particular needs and capacities of each of the parties but the parties should not hesitate to get in contact if issues emerge within the project or between the two parties.

### I. COLLECTING FEEDBACK

Once the request is met, if there is no need for additional involvement by PILNet, PILnet will generally follow-up with both parties to collect feedback via telephone or a brief questionnaire two weeks and three months after the match.

On occasion, PILnet will conduct in-depth case studies on certain projects in order to closely examine the impact of the match and how the matching process could be improved in the future. In this way, PILnet will actively take steps to ensure that the matching process is as responsible, adaptable, and substantive as possible.



