

PRO BONO & THE PACT

GRF LEGAL COMMUNITY PLEDGE - BRIEFING PAPER

Leveraging Pro Bono in the Context of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum

Purpose, Structure & Scope

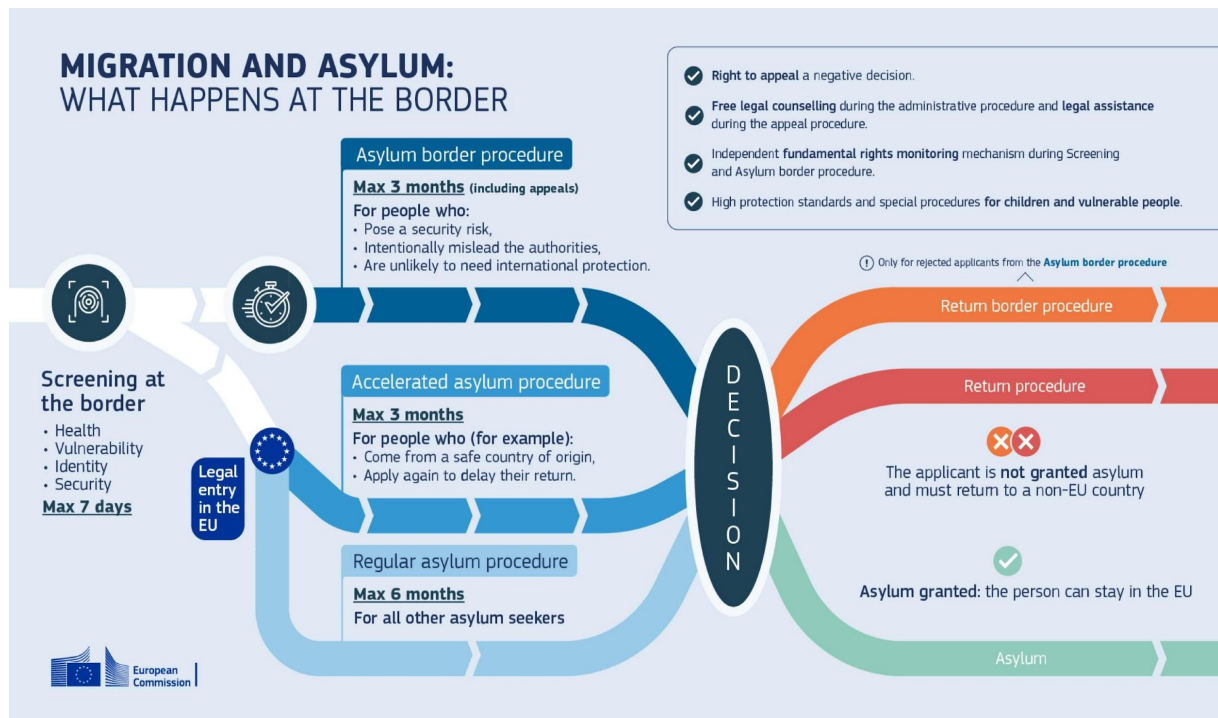
This briefing paper has been prepared in advance of a workshop — *Leveraging Pro Bono in the Context of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum* — convened by [Global Refugee Forum \(GRF\) Legal Community Pledge](#) members at PILnet's 2026 European Convening. The workshop will bring together law firms, NGOs, UNHCR, legal actors, and experts with lived experience of displacement and statelessness to explore how pro bono legal services can be leveraged to support the protection of displaced and stateless people in the context of the EU's new Pact on Migration and Asylum, which is due to take effect in June 2026. This briefing is primarily a resource for workshop participants but may also be of interest to the broader pro bono and refugee response community.

This paper provides an initial overview of the Pact and is structured around four key thematic sections — **Legal Assistance & Procedural Safeguards; Detention; Protection of Unaccompanied Children, Victims of Trafficking and Others in Vulnerable Situations;** and **Statelessness and Nationality** — each identifying key protection gaps and considerations, pro bono opportunities, and links to further resources. It concludes with proposed next steps to advance pro bono responses to the Pact.

The Pact also has significant external dimensions, including cooperation with third countries, safe third country designations, and a complementary Return Regulation currently under negotiation. This paper and its complementary workshop focus on the Pact as it applies within EU Member States; Pledge members intend to explore these external dimensions at a later stage, including once the text of the Return Regulation has been finalised.

Overview of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum was adopted in May 2024 after years of negotiation. It is set to take effect across EU Member States — and parts of it in associated states — by June 2026. The Pact implies major changes for Europe's national asylum systems, introducing ten new or reformed legislative files aimed at harmonizing the EU's asylum system. At the same time, the Pact is being complemented by new legislation focused on cooperation with third countries, including in the areas of safe third country rules and returns. This is combined with a political focus on increasing cooperation with third countries aimed at reducing the number of people that seek protection in Europe.



Source: European Commission — Migration and Asylum: What Happens at the Border

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE PACT

- **Increased use of border procedures:** Upon arrival at the external border, asylum seekers will be screened to assess their health and potential vulnerability, after which they will be referred to an appropriate procedure. More asylum seekers will have their applications processed in expedited border procedures, entailing increased responsibility for countries at the EU's external border.
- **Stricter responsibility rules:** A new Asylum and Migration Management Regulation (AMMR) will replace the existing Dublin Regulation. The AMMR includes an adjusted "Dublin system" as well as a solidarity mechanism. Legal safeguards under the new AMMR procedure have been considerably reduced — limiting the right to appeal, removing suspensive effect, and permitting unaccompanied children to be transferred to the first country of registration. Asylum seekers may face sanctions for non-compliance, such as losing the right to accommodation.
- **New solidarity mechanism:** To address the increased responsibility of EU countries at the external border, an annual process will assess which countries need support and which can contribute. EU countries may choose between different forms of solidarity, such as redistributing asylum seekers or providing financial support.
- **Introduces the new concept of "legal fiction of non-entry":** In screening and border procedures, asylum seekers are treated as if they are at the border and have not yet entered the Schengen Area — a concept known as "legal fiction of non-entry."
- **Increased risk of de facto detention:** Member states must "ensure the presence" of asylum seekers in screening and border procedures. Combined with the legal fiction of non-entry, this creates a significant risk that more asylum seekers will be detained during these procedures.

- **Legal aid and procedural rights:** Asylum seekers will have the right to increased access to legal advice ("legal counseling") during the initial phase of the asylum procedure, and child rights protections have been strengthened. However, the new EU asylum rules are complex, carry tight deadlines, and in many procedures do not grant automatic suspensive effect on appeal — creating an even greater need for impartial and qualified legal assistance.
- **New rules for crisis situations:** EU countries may deviate from standard asylum rules in crisis or force majeure situations, such as (undefined) high numbers of arrivals. The term "instrumentalization of migration" is introduced to describe situations where a third country allows asylum seekers to cross its territory toward an EU Member State.
- **Laying the groundwork for externalization policies:** Complementary legislation revised the 'safe third country' criteria so that a 'connection' with the third country is no longer required when an agreement exists with a Member State or when the applicant has transited through that country. While such arrangements must still comply with EU and international law, this is widely seen as a significant step toward enabling broader externalization policies.

FURTHER RESOURCES

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

- [Key Advocacy Messages: Statelessness and the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum \(2025\)](#)
- [Advocacy Brief: Independent National Monitoring Mechanisms under the EU Pact \(2025\)](#)
- [Recommendations to the Cypriot and Irish Presidencies of the Council of the EU \(2025\)](#)
- [Accessible Legal Aid for Asylum Seekers \(2026\)](#)

European Commission

- [Pact on Migration and Asylum — Migration and Home Affairs](#)
- [Infographic on Border Procedures](#)

European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)

- [National Implementation Plans and National Strategies under the EU Pact](#)

European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE)

- [Policy Note 49: All Packed Up and Ready — Assessment of the State of Play on Pact Implementation \(2025\)](#)
- [Comments Papers](#)

Danish Refugee Council (DRC)

- [EU Pact on Migration and Asylum](#)

International Rescue Committee (IRC)

- [What Is the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum?](#)

Legal Assistance & Procedural Safeguards

KEY GAPS AND CONSIDERATIONS

- To counter the increased complexity of the asylum procedures, the Pact introduces the right to legal counseling at the first administrative level of the procedure to help asylum seekers

navigate the asylum system. As free legal counseling in the administrative procedure is a novelty, it will be important to monitor how it is implemented in practice, to ensure that it goes beyond mere information provision, and to advocate for legal practitioners being the ones providing counseling.

- Organizations and persons providing advice and counseling shall have access to asylum seekers during the screening procedure; however, member states may impose limits to such access — including for administrative management, a term that may be interpreted broadly given its vagueness. Moreover, concerns persist regarding how the screening form will be handled. The form is amenable to administrative and judicial review only during ensuing asylum or return procedures, and applicants have the possibility (not the right) to flag inaccuracies. As the form will be crucial for all following procedural steps, ensuring it is filled in in appropriate detail and that asylum seekers can challenge inaccuracies will be critical.
- Under the Asylum Procedures Regulation, certain provisions allow member states to practically restrict the effectiveness of legal assistance. This includes conducting interviews without a legal adviser present, permitting member states to restrict legal advisers from intervening until the end of the interview, limiting access to certain files, and enabling staff other than determining authorities to conduct interviews. The distinction between the right to legal counseling in the administrative procedure and the right to free legal assistance and representation during appeal is also of concern.
- With the complex and accelerated procedures foreseen in the Pact, asylum seekers must have access to high-quality independent legal aid services to ensure that procedural guarantees are respected. For an asylum seeker to engage meaningfully in the process, it is essential that vulnerabilities are identified at the start of the procedure — during screening — to ensure access to adequate reception conditions and appropriate procedures.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PRO BONO ENGAGEMENT

- **Monitor access to asylum seekers** in screening and border procedures — including the implementation of limits on access for organizations and persons providing advice at border crossing points.
- **Advocate for robust legal aid schemes**, including collecting best practices of pro bono partnerships with legal aid actors across different country contexts to support advocacy.
- **Map gaps in legal aid provision** in asylum procedures. Legal counseling is introduced at the first instance — how will this be implemented across member states, and what gaps emerge?
- **Challenge sanctions for asylum seekers**, such as the reduction of legal safeguards and the loss of accommodation rights under the AMMR.
- **Map legal avenues for human rights claims** under the new Pact, including through courts, EU agencies (e.g., EUAA fundamental rights complaint mechanisms), and international human rights mechanisms.
- **Support strategic litigation** to challenge implementation of the Pact — including border procedures, safe third country designations, and cross-country cooperation for strategic litigation.

- **Provide legal information** ("know your rights") and training for practitioners on changes in national asylum laws arising from Pact implementation.
- **Address gaps in legal representation** in asylum procedures and family reunification, which are likely to grow as accelerated procedures are introduced.

FURTHER RESOURCES

European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE)

- [The Guarantees of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights in Respect of Legal Counseling, Assistance and Representation in Asylum Procedures](#)

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

- [Advocacy Brief: Legal Counseling, Legal Assistance, and Representation under the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum \(2025\)](#)

European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)

- [Practical Guide on Free Legal Counseling \(2025\)](#)

Danish Refugee Council (DRC)

- [Ensuring Fair Asylum Procedures Requires Access to High-Quality Independent Legal Aid](#)

Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE)

- [Guide for Bars & Lawyers on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum](#)

Detention, Alternatives to Detention, and Restrictions of Freedom of Movement

KEY GAPS AND CONSIDERATIONS

- **Detention as a measure of last resort:** The Pact requires that detention be necessary, proportionate, and based on an individualized assessment as a measure of last resort. Grounds for detention are numerous, including to verify identity or nationality, ensure compliance with movement restrictions, prevent absconding, or decide on the right to enter the territory during a border procedure.
- **Restrictions of freedom of movement:** The Pact allows for restrictions of freedom of movement — optional in ordinary procedures but mandatory in border procedures. Two types are provided: requiring residence in a designated place and requiring regular reporting to authorities. While similar to alternatives to detention (ATDs), these are legally distinct, as they do not require a detention ground. However, without appropriate safeguards, they risk amounting to de facto detention.
- **Detention of children:** Children in families and unaccompanied children may be detained as a measure of last resort, after establishing that less coercive alternatives cannot be effectively applied and that detention is in their best interests.
- **Border procedure concerns:** Border procedures invoke the legal fiction of non-entry and often occur in areas difficult to access, raising safeguarding concerns and the likelihood of prolonged detention. The requirement for applicants to reside 'at or in proximity to the external border or transit zones' risks resulting in de facto detention.

- **Extended detention timelines:** Adults and children may be held in detention at the border for up to six months; in security cases this may be extended further.
- **Alternatives to detention must be prioritized:** The Pact requires that ATDs be considered, analyzed, and ruled out before applying detention. Community-based ATDs are cost-effective, avoid the harms of detention, and increase compliance. The International Detention Coalition (IDC) defines ATD as 'any law, policy or practice by which persons are not detained for reasons related to their migration status.'
- **Judicial review timelines:** New timelines for judicial review of detention are set at 15 days, or 21 days in exceptional circumstances. Importantly, there is an obligation to give reasons as to why alternatives to detention cannot be applied.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PRO BONO ENGAGEMENT

- **Legal advice in detention:** Provision of legal advice and challenging detention orders within notably shorter timeframes.
- **Cross-border partnerships:** Law firms can strengthen cross-border partnerships to support asylum seekers at borders, including accessing legal support if held in a third country return hub or in the event of transfer to another member state.
- **Legal resources and information:** Creating legal advice packs, handbooks, and multilingual videos providing step-by-step guidance for individuals seeking asylum at borders.

FURTHER RESOURCES

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

- [Unlocking Rights: Towards Ending Immigration Detention for Asylum-Seekers and Refugees \(2024\)](#)
- [Advocacy Brief: Restrictions of Movement, Detention and Alternatives to Detention under the EU Pact \(2025\)](#)
- [Advocacy Brief: Independent National Monitoring Mechanisms under the EU Pact \(2025\)](#)

International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)

- [Never in the Best Interests of the Child](#)

International Detention Coalition (IDC)

- [Alternatives as Fiction? What the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum Means for Alternatives to Detention](#)
- [There Are Alternatives: A Handbook for Preventing Immigration Detention](#)

European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)

- [Guidelines on Alternatives to Detention \(2024\)](#)

Protection of Unaccompanied Children, Victims of Trafficking and Others in Vulnerable Situations

KEY GAPS AND CONSIDERATIONS

- **Accelerated border and return procedures:** Risk of non-identification of unaccompanied children, trafficking victims, and others in vulnerable situations, as timelines are too short for safe disclosure. Time constraints limit communication, rapport-building, necessary assessments, and involvement of specialized experts.
- **Detention in border facilities:** Closed or detention-like border facilities increase control by traffickers and reduce opportunities for safe identification and access to legal counseling.
- **Screening within 3–7 days:** This is unlikely to detect trafficking indicators, particularly for traumatized individuals who may not trust authorities or fear speaking openly.
- **Lack of specialized staff:** Limited access to legal assistance at borders increases the risk of victims being channeled into inadmissibility or return tracks. Screening authorities must be properly trained and able to cooperate with child protection and health experts.
- **Identification challenges:** Children (including unaccompanied) and adults under traffickers' control may be misclassified, especially where exploitation is not visible or is ongoing.
- **Age disputes:** The Pact introduces new provisions for multidisciplinary age assessment, including the provision of information, appointment of a representative/guardian, informed consent, and the right to appeal.
- **Conflation of guardian and legal adviser roles:** For unaccompanied children, confusion between the roles of guardian and legal adviser may result in delays or gaps in access to legal counseling and representation.
- **Lack of best-interests procedures:** Insufficient procedures to assess and consider the best interests of the child across all stages of the procedure.
- **Need for a victim-centered, trauma-informed approach:** Revised Anti-Trafficking Directive (EU) 2024/1712 includes some positive elements: child-specific safeguards, mandatory appointment of a guardian, strengthened National Referral Mechanisms, non-prosecution of victims, and unconditional access to support regardless of willingness to cooperate in criminal proceedings.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PRO BONO ENGAGEMENT

- **Legal information,** counseling, direct assistance and representation.
- **Research and monitoring** of legislative reform, policy development, practices, and case law, as well as case law analysis and awareness-raising publications.
- **Drafting model legislation** and commenting on legislative reform proposals.
- **Strategic litigation,** joint advocacy efforts and training for frontline practitioners.

- **Support early legal identification of vulnerability indicators** during screening and border procedures — developing practical tools such as leaflets outlining key indicators, referral pathways, and exemption criteria.
- **Rapid review of case files** to flag signs of exploitation and vulnerability and prevent wrongful channeling into accelerated procedures — setting up a small expert pool to conduct quick case-note assessments.
- **Assist with safe referrals to national protection systems** by creating a streamlined referral protocol and maintaining an up-to-date contact list of specialized services.
- **Capacity-building for frontline NGOs** on legal standards for non-punishment, safe disclosure, and exemption from border procedures.

PROPOSED INITIATIVE: TRAFFICKING IDENTIFICATION RAPID REVIEW HUB

- Offer quick expert assessments of potential trafficking cases at screening.
- Produce short memos arguing for exemption from border procedures.
- Develop tools and checklists for early detection of trafficking indicators.

PROPOSED INITIATIVE: AGE ASSESSMENT MONITORING AND ADVOCACY

- Monitor legislative and policy changes in EU Member States.
- Draft model legal provisions ensuring safeguards; comment on draft legislation.
- Monitor and analyze case law; publish blogs or articles on key developments.
- Train lawyers on key principles (e.g., presumption of minority, best interests) and how to prepare appeals.
- Convene an expert exchange across member states.

FURTHER RESOURCES

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

- [Advocacy Brief: Screening and Identification of Persons with Vulnerabilities under the EU Pact \(2025\)](#)

UNICEF, UNHCR and IOM

- [EU Asylum and Migration Pact — Children \(2024\)](#)

EU Immigration and Asylum Law and Policy Blog

- [Vulnerability in the New Pact: An Empty Promise to Protect, or an Operational Concept?](#)

Eurolawhub

- [EU Asylum and Migration Law in 2025: The New Pact, Border Procedures, and Fundamental Rights](#)

European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)

- [Victims of Human Trafficking in Asylum and Reception, Fact Sheet No. 34 \(2025\)](#)
- [Age Assessment Practices in EU+ Countries](#)
- [Practical Guide on Age Assessment](#)

European Disability Forum (EDF)

- [Recommendations for the Implementation of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive](#)

International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)

- [EU: Unaccompanied Children Must Not Be Placed in Asylum Border Procedures](#)

International Rescue Committee (IRC)

- [Safeguarding the Rights of Unaccompanied Children at EU Borders under the EU Pact](#)

International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP)

- [Europe Must Close the Rights Gap for Migrants and Asylum Seekers with Disabilities](#)

Statelessness & Nationality Issues

KEY GAPS AND CONSIDERATIONS

- **What is statelessness?** To be stateless is to have no nationality. This can mean denial of many of the basic rights most people take for granted. In Europe, statelessness affects over half a million people — both recent migrants and those who have lived in the same place for generations. Statelessness is often intertwined with other causes of forced displacement, including persecution of minorities, war, and discrimination.
- **How is statelessness relevant to the Pact?** Among people living in Europe today are individuals who arrived seeking international protection and were stateless either prior to leaving their country of origin or have since become stateless. According to Eurostat, around 3% of first-time asylum applicants to the EEA are recorded as stateless or of 'unknown nationality' — very likely an underestimate. A high proportion of refugees come from countries with significant stateless populations or discriminatory nationality laws, including Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan.
- **Why identifying statelessness is critical:** An asylum applicant's statelessness is critical when assessing their claim. It impacts the asylum determination process, the nationality rights of their children, and access to procedures such as family reunification, resettlement, and

naturalization. It also affects the ability to return an individual, as no country may accept them.

- **Consequences of non-identification:** Almost all EU Member States are party to international instruments that protect stateless people — including the 1954 Convention — but a significant gap remains between this framework and awareness and respect for these rights in practice. Stateless people often face years of uncertainty, destitution, and repeated, lengthy immigration detention.
- **From identification to protection:** One solution is the establishment of dedicated Statelessness Determination Procedures (SDPs) to identify stateless people and grant adequate protection. Currently only some EU countries have SDPs, and even where they exist, significant gaps remain.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PRO BONO ENGAGEMENT

Following advocacy by the European Network on Statelessness (ENS) and others, the final Pact instruments include key provisions on statelessness — including a requirement that the screening form include 'indication of nationalities or statelessness,' and that indications of statelessness be recorded during the asylum procedure. For the first time, the EU asylum acquis creates binding obligations for Member States to identify statelessness. However, given lack of sensitisation to statelessness and a difficult political climate, an immediate challenge is to ensure proper implementation of these new provisions. A key risk is that people across Europe face prolonged or repeat immigration detention because no state accepts responsibility for them, a risk heightened by accelerated procedures under the Pact.

Potential pro bono support could include:

- Comparative research to map how the Pact is being implemented across member states, particularly regarding screening, borders, detention, and referrals of stateless people.
- Develop and roll out litigation-ready arguments, templates, and resources for use by ENS members and lawyers on detention and identification/protection of stateless people.
- Explore how implementation of Pact obligations to identify initial indications of statelessness can leverage adoption of more SDPs or other regularization routes.
- Utilize increased awareness of statelessness generated by Pact implementation to improve protection and access to rights for specific populations — including displaced people from Ukraine and exiled Belarusians and their children.
- Develop and support litigation-ready analysis, comparative jurisprudence, thematic briefings, direct representation, and third-party interventions, to challenge unlawful detention and strengthen safeguards where removal is not realistically foreseeable.

FURTHER RESOURCES

European Network on Statelessness (ENS)

- [Implementing the New Statelessness Provisions in the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum](#)
- [Statelessness Determination and Protection in Europe: Good Practice, Challenges and Risks \(2025\)](#)
- [Litigation Toolkit on Statelessness for Legal Practitioners](#)

Statefree

- [Hierarchies of Statelessness in Germany](#)
- [Case Assistant Tool](#)

Apatride Network

- [Childoc: Preventing Statelessness of Belarusian Children Born in Exile](#)

Key Websites

ENS: www.statelessness.eu | Statefree: www.statefree.world | Apatride Network: apatride.eu | ENS Statelessness Index: index.statelessness.eu | ENS Case Law Database: caselaw.statelessness.eu | ENS Stateless Journeys: statelessjourneys.org

What Next?

The European Convening marks the beginning of a sustained effort to mobilize pro bono legal capacity in response to the Pact's implementation. Addressing the legal protection gaps created by the Pact will be a central focus for the Pledge community in Europe and PILnet is committed to maintaining momentum and deepening engagement. The following steps are planned:

- **Outreach and pro bono project scoping with NGOS:** PILnet will conduct targeted outreach to NGOs and refugee-led organizations (RLOs), and their associated networks, to raise awareness about the value and potential of pro bono legal support, provide hands-on assistance to scope and develop pro bono projects, and actively share these opportunities with law firms in the Pledge community.
- **Outreach to relevant legal networks:** PILnet will share this briefing and follow-up materials with pro bono legal networks, bar associations, and law firm pro bono coordinators across Europe, raising awareness of the protection gaps created by the Pact and the role pro bono legal actors can play in addressing them.
- **Pro bono capacity-building workshop for NGOs and RLOs in Europe:** A workshop will be convened for NGOs and RLOs to strengthen their capacity to engage with and manage pro bono legal support — including guidance on preparing case referrals, communicating effectively with law firm partners, and structuring pro bono partnerships for maximum impact.
- **Pro bono pitching roundtable:** A structured pitching event will bring together NGOs and RLOs in need of pro bono legal support with law firms and legal networks ready to provide it.
- **Ongoing conversations at Pledge convenings:** The Pledge community's monthly exchanges and other convenings will provide valuable platforms to follow up on issues raised and share developments as the Pact is implemented.
- **Peer learning and resource-sharing:** Pledge members and partners will contribute to a shared repository of pro bono resources, template legal tools, training materials, and good practice guides to support legal actors working on Pact-related issues across Europe.

- **Monitoring implementation and tracking impact.** As the Pact comes into force in June 2026, PILnet and Pledge partners will monitor its implementation, document emerging legal needs, and track the pro bono legal response — using evidence to advocate for greater investment in state-funded legal aid and access to justice for displaced and stateless people.

Are you an NGO, RLO, SLO, or legal service provider? If you would like to be matched with free legal help to support you and your clients to navigate the Pact, either at a programmatic level or to address your own legal needs, you can learn more about our [GRF Legal Community pro bono matching portal](#).

You can submit your pro bono project ideas directly to us via our [Legal Assistance Intake Forum](#).

Get Involved

Join the GRF Legal Community Pledge

The Pledge provides a unique multi-stakeholder framework for law firms, NGOs, and other legal actors to formalize their commitment to providing pro bono legal support to displaced and stateless people and the organizations that serve them. By making a Pledge, your organization joins a growing community of legal actors working together to ensure access to justice for those who need it most by contributing pro bono capacity in ways that are meaningful, sustainable, and coordinated.

HOW TO JOIN THE PLEDGE

• STEP 1

Read the Framework

Start with the [Pledge Framework](#) and [Pledging Guidance](#) to understand the initiative and begin shaping your pledge.

• STEP 2

Draft Your Pledge

Draft your pledge using [UNHCR's submission template](#). PILnet is happy to assist — contact us at grfpledge@pilnet.org.

• STEP 3

Submit Your Pledge

Submit your pledge online via the [GCR Pledge Submission Platform](#), confirming your participation in the Legal Community Pledge.

Stay updated on Pledge-related news and learn more about the Pledge by:

- ▶ [signing up](#) to the quarterly newsletter,
- ▶ reaching out to grfpledge@pilnet.org, or
- ▶ exploring our web page: pilnet.org/pledge

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The GRF Legal Community Pledge initiative is made possible thanks to the generous financial support of many of the law firms involved. PILnet warmly thanks all contributing law firms for their commitment — not only in providing pro bono legal services, but in helping sustain the infrastructure that connects legal capacity with those who need it most.