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Guide

DIOCESAN PLANNING FOR IMMIGRATION PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

September 2026

With gratitude to the Diocese of Lexington and
the New Americans Initiative:



Diocese of Lexington



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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This guide does not represent an official position of the Diocese of Lexington, and any opinions or steps expressed here are not intended to be interpreted as legal advice.

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1. Why Diocesan Planning for Immigration Preparedness and Response

Migrant families live with increasing fear and uncertainty. Many of them are Catholics and members of our parishes, congregations and schools. **According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops**, about one out of five Catholics is at risk of deportation in the United States or lives in a household with someone who is.

In October 2025, Pope Leo XIV called Catholics **not to remain silent** before the plight of our immigrant brothers and sisters and, in November 2025, U.S. bishops **unequivocally spoke** in support of vulnerable migrants and their families, opposing 'indiscriminate mass deportations.' In the same message, bishops clearly stated that 'human dignity and national security are not in conflict. Both are possible if people of good will work together.'

The Church's call to accompany migrants is not partisan or ideological; it is a deeply moral and pastoral issue rooted in the Gospel and the **Church's core teachings**.

Catholics are compelled to uphold immigrants' human dignity, preserve family unity and work for the common good. For that, dioceses, parishes and immigrant communities must work synodally to advance a new response. One way to do this is through diocesan immigration planning.

Diocesan immigration planning is a diocesan-wide process to co-create and implement a Catholic vision to protect immigrants' God-given human dignity while upholding US laws. This planning coordinates and strengthens multiple local ministries and services supporting migrants, while ensuring they have the right legal information and expertise. It ensures parishes have the resources needed to prepare their own action plans. And it directly supports families with legal preparedness and pastoral care.

Based on the Diocese of Lexington's immigration diocesan preparedness and response, this document offers practical steps for bishops and diocesan leaders to prepare diocesan immigration planning. The document is structured as follows. The following section details planning steps for institutional, legal and family preparedness and pastoral care. The section after breaks down the process by key actors in the diocese and their main roles. A final section summarizes expected outcomes that can serve as evaluation metrics.

2. How to Be Institutionally, Legally and Pastorally Prepared

The goal of diocesan immigration planning is not just to produce a written plan (which may be needed), but to create processes and mechanisms that can respond to the growing needs and challenges facing the migrant population.

Designing and implementing a diocesan immigration planning process is iterative and comprises three dimensions: institutional preparedness at the diocesan and parish levels, legal preparedness and family preparedness and pastoral care. These dimensions are interrelated and should be advanced together. However, we present them separately in this document for clarity purposes.

Each planning process and its concrete outcomes will look different depending on the local context, but we offer general guidance on steps a diocese can consider.

Institutional Preparedness

Goal: Ensure that the diocese and parishes have the right structures and coordination mechanisms in place to better respond to the pastoral, legal and humanitarian needs of at-risk immigrants.

Steps:

1. **Early recognition.** Identify hubs of action in the diocese and gaps in coordination in the accompaniment and pastoral ministry to migrants. Support for immigrants cannot depend on one ministry or service such as Hispanic Ministry, Justice and Peace Ministry, or Catholic Charities alone. It must be shared across ministries and diocesan realities in a unified response.
2. **Create a migration commission.** Migration commissions do not need to be completely new structures. Under the bishop's and his senior staff's leadership, identify existing structures and pastoral plans that can host renewed diocesan-wide action on immigration. If none exist, create a new one that builds on existing diocesan pastoral mechanisms.

A diocesan migration commission, whether newly created or through an existing structure (referred to here as 'migration commission' for brevity), is a permanent coordination process and/or structure to advance new diocesan action in synchrony with the Bishop to support migrants. It determines how the diocese works on immigration and how it will work with others. Migration commissions should include a mix of stakeholders: diocesan staff, clergy, religious, partner organizations and service providers and parishioner leaders, including members of affected communities (*see the following section on roles and responsibilities*).

A migration commission is not an endpoint in itself, but the beginning of a deeper diocesan process of supporting migrants.

For example, the Diocese of Lexington did not create a separate migration commission. Rather, the Diocese built its immigration preparedness and response upon the existing Hispanic Pastoral Plan and Structure, approved by Bishop John Stowe in 2019 and grounded in the principle of Pastoral de Conjunto.

Following the November 2024 election, the Diocesan Coordinator for Hispanic Ministry first reconnected with existing immigration partners, including nonprofit legal service providers, private immigration attorneys, different immigration organizations and other community partners, in order to update resources and legal guidance and to prepare for the changing immigration environment.

The Diocesan Coordinator then met with Bishop John Stowe and worked with him through several phases of diocesan coordination. This included working with the Chancery Leadership Team, where the response was further developed and additional areas of preparedness were identified. For example, the Superintendent of Catholic Schools subsequently coordinated with the trusted Attorney Emily Jones of the New Americans Initiative for specialized presentations and formation for Catholic school personnel.

The process then continued with Bishop John and the Presbyteral Council, which brought together the deans, vicars and other diocesan priests and leaders. Beginning in February 2025, the Diocese worked with Attorney Emily Jones and New Americans Initiative to develop and organize practical diocesan resources, which were published

on the diocesan website and distributed throughout the Diocese. These resources were made available to pastors, priests, parishes, diocesan employees, parish employees and parish leaders and included video trainings, legal information, Know Your Rights materials, preparedness checklists, Power of Attorney information, connections with immigration legal providers and other tools for diocesan, deanery and parish-level formation and preparedness. Priests throughout the Diocese were instructed to review these resources as part of their preparation for the formation that followed. This preparation was followed by a dedicated day of formation at the annual Priests' Convocation at Saint Meinrad Seminary, where Attorney Emily Jones gave two presentations to the priests and pastors of the Diocese, allowing them to ask questions and build on the information and resources they had already received.

Permanent deacons, along with parish and diocesan staff, also received these resources beginning in February 2025. The formal formation for the permanent deacons took place later, in May 2026, when Attorney Emily Jones provided an overview of the Kentucky immigration situation and addressed questions and concerns that had developed through their experience and use of the resources.

Implementation and ongoing pastoral coordination then proceeded through the existing diocesan structure of deans, Hispanic Deanery Coordinators, pastors, parish leaders, diocesan offices and community partners. The response also drew upon and expanded collaborative relationships developed through earlier diocesan work with Catholic, interfaith, nonprofit, legal, mental-health and community organizations.

3. **Co-design the diocesan immigration planning.** The migration commission leads the co-creation process of the diocesan immigration planning. The process should focus on defining the key pillars of the immigration plan and the areas of work where the diocese should focus. The planning's design should be synodal, including meaningful dialogue with relevant actors in the diocese such as diocesan leadership, clergy and religious, parish leaders, service providers and affected communities.

The migration commission formalizes the key pillars of the diocesan immigration planning and presents it to the bishop for his approval.

Pillars of Diocesan Immigration Planning

The diocesan immigration planning process offers a roadmap for diocesan action on immigration. It is anchored in certain pillars and is a recurring exercise in discerning needs and responses.

Diocesan immigration planning may consider the following pillars:

1. **Diocesan migration commission.** Settled within existing pastoral mechanisms in the diocese or as a new entity, the diocesan migration commission serves as a coordination hub for pastoral and public support for vulnerable migrants. It advances a vision, action and formation programs, and resources on immigration for the entire diocesan community in close coordination with the bishop.
2. **Pastoral support.** It may include a wide array of pastoral responses to meet the changing needs of the local migrant population, from immigration detention ministry, court accompaniment, family accompaniment, food pantries, mental health ministry and other forms of pastoral support that meet migrants' spiritual and humanitarian needs. Dioceses should also consider pastoral support to agents enforcing immigration law in the community.
3. **Education and formation.** It considers education and formation proposals for clergy, religious, families and other relevant diocesan and community actors. It can encompass multiple formation topics, from understanding recent policy changes to deepening our knowledge of Scripture and Catholic social teaching on immigration.
4. **Legal preparedness.** It includes legal knowledge and preparedness for diocesan structures, parishes and Catholic schools and hospitals, as well as providing relevant legal information and support to fearful families.

5. **Public witness and advocacy.** It reflects how the diocese would like to publicly stand with fearful immigrants in the community and which key areas are priorities for advocacy from a Catholic perspective. Public witness actions can range from periodic or one-off public prayer events for migrants to processions, conferences and other public actions. Advocacy areas can include pastoral access to immigration detention centers, the release and care of detained immigrant pregnant women and children, the prevention of family separation in immigrant families, ethical immigration enforcement in line with Catholic social teaching and reforms to our immigration system so it is fair, efficient and humane. Advocacy can happen in coordination with the diocese's state Catholic conference and other relevant actors.
6. **Parish and community engagement.** It offers concrete diocesan coordination guidelines and programmatic support with pastors and ministry leaders to implement the diocesan immigration plans and create parish action plans to support at-risk migrant parishioners.
7. **Rapid response.** It considers protocols for immigration enforcement actions in parishes, Catholic schools, Catholic hospitals and diocesan property, so the diocese understands the law and follows diocesan-wide established protocols. It can also include creating diocesan-wide or parish-based rapid response networks.
8. **Charitable fund.** Dioceses can consider establishing a charitable fund to support emergency humanitarian, legal and additional needs facing migrant parishioners and families.

4. **Diocesan and parish implementation and evaluation.** Diocesan planning and implementation are two processes that happen in tandem. In other words, there is a bit of planning, then a bit of implementation. Then again some planning, and back to implementation. This iterative process must be responsive to the moment and changing needs.

The migration commission formalizes the key pillars of the diocesan immigration planning and presents it to the bishop for his approval.

For example, in Lexington, the immigration planning recognized as priority pillars parish and family preparedness, pastoral accompaniment to migrants, education and formation and diocesan legal preparedness (including Catholic schools) before potential immigration enforcement actions.

Legal Preparedness

Goal: understand current immigration policies and laws affecting dioceses, parishes and migrants to prepare our response accordingly.

Steps:

1. **Understand the existing local legal and community coalition.** Before taking action, identify local service providers with immigration legal expertise in your area. This can include your local Catholic Charities, other Catholic legal organizations, nonprofit legal service providers, private law firms and attorneys and even retired individuals with immigration law experience. Understand what their expertise is and their capacity to provide specific services or advice.
2. **Establish working relationships.** Establish solid working relationships with trusted legal service providers in your area. The goal of those relationships is twofold: 1. To work together to better understand how policy changes and existing laws affect the diocesan and parish structures' work on immigration; and 2. To expand legal support for affected immigrant parishioners. The diocesan migration commission can lead coordination efforts.
3. **Translate legal expertise into diocesan-wide protocols and formation.** Together with trusted legal service providers in your community, develop diocesan-wide protocols that inform diocesan staff, clergy and religious, Catholic school principals,

Catholic hospital managers and other relevant community members on how to act in case of immigration enforcement operations on or around their premises. A policy that generally restricted these operations in so-called sensitive locations was rescinded in January 2025, and although rare, parishes, schools and hospitals should be prepared.

Additionally, work with trusted legal service providers to organize formation programs for diocesan staff, clergy, religious, ministry leaders and other appropriate community members on relevant legal and policy changes on immigration.

4. **Translate legal expertise into practical parish resources.** Work with trusted legal service providers to develop practical resources for parishes and their leaders, which can include:
 - a. Know Your Rights training for parishioners in English, Spanish and any other relevant languages;
 - b. preparedness checklists;
 - c. Power of Attorney information;
 - d. lists of immigration clinics, private attorneys and consulates;
 - e. information cards;
 - f. and links to additional trusted immigration resources.

Diocesan migration commissions help parishes connect with trusted legal service providers to obtain training and information, refer cases and offer parishioners reliable information based on local circumstances. At the same time, parishes make this support available and accessible to their parishioners (*see more below and in the [CLINIC's Parish Toolkit](#)*).

For example, in Lexington, parishes connected with multiple trusted legal service organizations referred by the Diocese to organize Know Your Rights presentations, organize Power of Attorney sessions for parishioners, deliver informational sessions to specific communities and distribute materials.

5. **Continuous formation.** The diocesan migration commission can organize recurring formation sessions on policy and legal changes at the local level for diocesan leaders, ensuring all community members have the most current legal information.

For example, the Diocese of Lexington **distributed legal materials and protocols** and supplemented that information with recurring training sessions for diocesan members, offered by attorney Emily Jones of the trusted local organization New Americans Initiative. These sessions particularly addressed the realities of Hispanic communities, which were among the most impacted.

Family Preparedness and Pastoral Care

Goal: Ensure families have the resources and knowledge to navigate uncertainty with verified, trusted information and representation and receive appropriate pastoral care and accompaniment when needed.

Steps:

1. **Identify the main needs of migrant families in the community.** In consultation with parishes, ministries and parishioners, identify the most pressing needs of migrant families in the diocese and each parish. Determine which local partners can best address those needs and coordinate with them within the diocesan immigration planning process.
2. **Facilitate access to practical legal preparation through resources, training and referrals to trusted service providers.** In coordination with trusted legal service providers, organize trainings and distribute information so families can access practical preparation for possible emergencies, including:
 - a. knowing basic rights;
 - b. knowing whom to contact for qualified legal assistance;
 - c. preparing emergency contacts;
 - d. making appropriate arrangements concerning children;
 - e. considering Power of Attorney issues;
 - f. securing important documents;
 - g. obtaining U.S. passports for U.S.-citizen children where appropriate;
 - h. knowing where to obtain legal, social and pastoral assistance;
 - i. And obtaining funds to cover private attorney fees, when needed.
3. **Expand existing ministries or create new ones at the diocesan and parish level for pastoral care.** Migrants and their families increasingly experience fear, family

separation and challenging conditions in detention centers, where some struggle to access pastoral care and the sacraments.

Dioceses and parishes may expand existing ministries or create new ones to meet these increasing needs, including an immigration prison ministry, a pastoral visitation ministry in detention, a mental health ministry, support networks that visit migrants in their homes and support them with taking their children to school or daily tasks, or specific charitable funds to meet the emergency needs of separated immigrant families.

For example, the Lexington response recognized that immigration enforcement creates fear, anxiety and family instability. Consequently, its response included mental health support, psychological formation for Hispanic leaders, support groups, Scripture-based spiritual accompaniment, prayer gatherings and other pastoral initiatives.

3. Who Leads What in Institutional, Legal and Family Preparedness

Designing a diocesan immigration plan is a synodal process. It must involve affected communities as agents of their own change and consider the realities of those supporting migrants: clergy, ordained ministers, lay leaders, diocesan administrators and Catholic school and hospital administrators. This section details their role in designing and implementing the diocesan immigration planning process and the parish immigration plans. Depending on each diocesan context and realities, these roles may vary.

A representation of the actors below should also participate in the diocesan migration commission.

1. **Bishop and auxiliary bishop(s):** They offer a moral and pastoral vision on immigration for each of their dioceses, encourage action and accompany the diocesan immigration planning and implementation process. They are visible heads of the diocesan solidarity with migrants, and their presence, action and words energize the community for bolder pastoral and accompaniment action.

Bishops are responsible for:

1. Designating one or two coordinators, episcopal vicars, or senior personnel (including chancellors) to lead a diocesan migration commission, if a migration commission is needed in the absence of other coordination mechanisms
2. Overseeing the design of the immigration planning and its implementation
3. Participating in the planning process by attending listening sessions with affected communities and supporting leaders and revising and approving relevant planning decisions on immigration
4. Overseeing and strategically getting involved in the planning implementation through: 1. words in the form of homilies, statements and pastoral letters; 2. prayer and accompaniment in the form of vigils, processions and pastoral ministries for migrants; and 3. actions in the form of public witness events, pastoral events and concrete advocacy for the migrant community, including with other religious traditions, business and labor leaders and other actors.

2. Multicultural Ministries (including Hispanic Ministry) and Peace & Justice

Ministry: Multicultural ministries and the Peace and Justice ministry often have immigration responsibilities. Depending on the diocese, one office or another will lead immigration work. These ministries offer deep insights into the struggles and realities of many local migrant communities they accompany and serve. They also have established connections with community and clergy leaders who accompany these populations and they can rally both affected communities and leaders. Their expertise must be part of decision-making in diocesan immigration planning and their work with migrants must become transversal across diocesan realities.

Hispanic Ministry and multicultural ministry leaders and coordinators are responsible for:

1. Analyzing immediate and long-term needs of the migrant populations they minister to and serving as the main liaison with directly impacted communities
2. Designing and leading outreach during the immigration planning and implementation process with parishes, religious leaders and local partners
3. Designing and executing education and leadership formation plans, in coordination with other community organizations and leaders, on legal and pastoral issues for clergy and at-risk families.

3. **Director of Communications:** Diocesan directors of communications play an essential role in transmitting the bishops' message to the broader community and ensuring that the diocese's public stand on immigration is rooted in the Gospel, Catholic social teaching and human dignity.

Diocesan communication directors are responsible for:

1. Articulating a strategy for communicating diocesan immigration plans, including priorities, resources and formation opportunities, to all relevant stakeholders in the diocese, including clergy, parish leaders and affected communities. They also ensure visibility of the diocesan immigration planning, as appropriate, on the diocesan website and relevant media channels
 2. Elaborating a messaging strategy on support for migrants and immigration overall that conveys the priorities established in the immigration planning and responds to the local realities of immigrant families in relevant languages
 3. Providing strategic support to the bishop in drafting statements, messages and videos for the local immigrant community and on immigration, ensuring that all relevant stakeholders are informed of the bishop's words and actions
 4. Mobilizing critical elements of the diocesan communications team, including but not limited to digital media and diocesan publications, to inform of any public statements of the bishops and support the diocesan immigration planning by uplifting stories of migration locally
 5. Communicating with outside partners and agencies at the local level, as well as with relevant media members, to inform about the diocese's priorities on immigration, its work and ongoing needs.
4. **Catholic Charities leaders:** Catholic Charities provides vital legal, humanitarian and accompaniment support to affected communities. As such, Catholic Charities leaders' expertise and direct contact with affected community members inform legal and humanitarian responses.

Catholic Charities leaders are responsible for:

1. Informing the bishop and diocesan leadership of immediate and long-term needs of affected migrant communities

2. In coordination with Hispanic, Multicultural and Peace and Justice Ministries, and when appropriate, designing and implementing outreach and legal education and formation plans for affected communities, parishes and clergy
 3. Designing and executing direct humanitarian relief and accompaniment programs for affected communities.
5. **Clergy and religious:** Priests, deacons and other ordained members of religious orders are the closest diocesan faces to affected people in the pews. They run charitable programs in their parishes, host formation sessions for their community members and provide spiritual accompaniment to detained individuals and fearful families.

Clergy, deacons and ordained members of religious orders are responsible for:

1. Elaborating parish plans that implement the diocesan immigration planning priorities and offer a concrete response at the local level to fearful families
 2. In coordination with affected communities, identifying formation and pastoral needs for parish members and ministry leaders that require diocesan attention
 3. With the support of diocesan structures, rallying and training leaders to accompany affected members and provide context-specific legal formation
 4. Coordinating with diocesan pastoral structures to advance planning in support of vulnerable migrant families.
6. **Affected communities:** Immigrants are not passive receivers of aid or compassion. Immigrants are agents in their own processes of protection and change. As such, vulnerable immigrants play a vital role in defining needs, proposing programming and organizing with other community members for mutual support and accompaniment.

Affected communities are responsible for:

1. In collaboration with diocesan leadership and community leaders, define formation and pastoral needs
 2. In collaboration with parish leaders, co-create parish immigration plans that respond to the local needs
 3. In coordination with clergy and other community members, offer theological reflection that advances deeper solidarity with the lived experience of affected communities

7. **Catholic school and hospital administrators.** Catholic schools and hospitals provide essential services to some of the most vulnerable populations: children and the sick. Administrators are critical leaders in keeping these places safe for all by understanding what immigration laws and policies say about enforcement in these areas and preparing and implementing protocols accordingly, in coordination with the diocese.

Catholic school and hospital administrators are responsible for:

1. In coordination with legal service providers and diocesan counsel, design and implement sensitive locations protocols in case of immigration enforcement actions
 2. Identify vulnerable families and work with the appropriate ministries and legal service providers to obtain concrete support
8. **(Catholic) Service providers supporting migrants in the area.** Service providers supporting migrants in the diocese, whether Catholic or not, offer the legal and technical expertise that diocesan leaders, clergy and other community members may lack. They are crucial partners in ensuring that dioceses, parishes and families understand immigration laws and policy changes and can prepare accordingly and access the resources they need. Additionally, they offer pro bono or low-cost humanitarian assistance and resources that complement the diocesan and parish action and meet urgent and complex needs.

(Catholic) service providers supporting migrants in the area may:

1. Offer trusted legal advice to diocesan leadership to design diocesan-wide sensitive location protocols, legal resources and other materials
2. In coordination with diocesan leadership and parish leaders, offer Know Your Rights trainings, Power of Attorney clinics and informational sessions for clergy and affected communities on relevant policy changes and laws
3. In coordination with diocesan leadership and parish leaders, establish a case referral network for migrants needing legal aid
4. Provide humanitarian support to vulnerable migrants in the community referred by parishes and other diocesan actors through food banks, low-cost medical assistance, including mental health support and more.

4. What to Expect After Launching Diocesan Immigration Planning

The preparation of a diocesan response to the realities of migrant communities is rooted in synodality, closeness to the pain of affected communities and leaders and prophetic, Gospel-rooted vision for change. Its implementation should lead to:

1. Stronger coordination among ministries and realities in a diocese serving migrants in a way that fosters new collaboration, expands capacity and enables deeper ministry and support to affected populations,
2. Better understanding of the legal landscape and development of appropriate, legal protocols to prepare for potential immigration enforcement actions on diocesan, parish, school, hospital and other Church property grounds,
3. Trained and informed leaders and affected parishioners who are better equipped to face increasing pastoral, legal and humanitarian challenges,
4. Renewed parish-based action to support affected parishioners in coordination with the diocese,
5. New public witness and advocacy actions that offer pastoral support and protect the most vulnerable families.

Annex. Trusted Legal Organizations and Resources at the National Level

Legal Resources

- National Immigration Legal Services Directory (to find organizations offering pro bono or low-cost immigration legal services): www.immigrationadvocates.org/legaldirectory
- We Have Rights (to understand our constitutional rights during encounters with immigration law enforcement): www.wehaverights.u

Trusted Legal Organizations

- Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc (CLINIC): www.cliniclegal.org
- National Immigration Law Center: www.nilc.org
- Immigrant Legal Resource Center (ILRC): www.ilrc.org
- National Immigrant Justice Center: www.immigrantjustice.org
- Welcome.US: www.welcome.us
- Amica Center: www.amicacenter.org
- Acacia Center for Justice: www.acaciajustice.org
- National Immigrant Women's Advocacy Project (NIWAP): www.niwaplibrary.wcl.american.edu
- ASISTA Immigration Assistance: www.asistahelp.org
- National Immigration Project: <https://nipnlg.org>
- American Immigration Lawyers Association: www.aila.org

Policy Updates

- Hope Border Institute's Frontera Dispatch: www.hopeborder.org/frontera-dispatch
- Center for Migration Studies: www.cmsny.org/subscribe
- Church World Service Daily State of Play:
www.cwsglobal.org/blog/daily-state-of-play-trumps-indefinite-refugee-ban-and-funding-halt
- USCCB Justice for Immigrants: www.justiceforimmigrants.org/join-us

ABOUT



The Hope Border Institute (HOPE) is the premier strategy center for faith leaders pursuing justice at the US-Mexico border. Through a robust program of research and policy work, leadership development and action, we work to build justice and deepen solidarity across the borderlands. Learn more at www.hopeborder.org.



The Center for Migration Studies (CMS) is a New York-based educational institute devoted to the study of international migration, to the promotion of understanding between immigrants and receiving communities, and to public policies that safeguard the dignity and rights of migrants, refugees, and newcomers. For more information, please visit www.cmsny.org.



The Catholic Immigrant Prophetic Action Project (Catholic IMMpact) is an initiative by the Hope Border Institute (HOPE) and the Center for Migration Studies of New York (CMS) to assist the Catholic Church in the United States in organizing a robust response with and for migrants and refugees in the country who are living in fear of immediate deportation. Through organizing, communications, research and rapid response, Catholic IMMpact supports (arch)dioceses in their mission to preach the Gospel and walk with immigrants. For more information, contact info@catholicimmpact.org or visit catholicimmpact.org.

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