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For Haitians in the U.S. Illegally, Some Help

By [KIRK SEMPLE](#)

Two years ago, at age 17, Stephanie Germain arrived in New York from Haiti, overstayed her tourist visa and slipped into the parallel universe of the illegal immigrant. While she managed to learn English, graduate from high school and enroll in [Queensborough Community College](#), her [immigration](#) status ensured that she would have to live largely out of the government's view.

On Thursday, however, she took her first tentative steps out of the shadows, attending a free legal clinic concerning the [special immigration status](#) the Obama administration has offered to Haitians living illegally in the United States.

The new designation, called temporary protected status and announced on Jan. 15, three days after the [earthquake in Haiti](#), protects recipients from deportation for 18 months and allows them to work. The status is offered from time to time to immigrants who are unable to return safely to their home countries because of armed conflict or natural disasters.

Ms. Germain, who has been living with her godfather in Richmond Hill, Queens, and receiving financial support from her parents back in Port-au-Prince, viewed the opportunity as nothing less than a release, albeit temporary, from a kind of imprisonment. "This allows me to live!" she exclaimed happily. "I can work, I can take care of myself, I can go to school."

The government has estimated that the designation could cover at least 100,000 Haitians believed to be living in the United States illegally, in addition to about 30,000 Haitians who have already been ordered deported.

Legal organizations are organizing free, confidential clinics around the country to help Haitians understand the details of the designation and how to qualify for it. On Friday, Gov. [David A. Paterson](#) and Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) announced the creation of the New York Haitian Earthquake Family Resource Center, which will provide support services. And the city will hold a clinic on applying for the special status on

Saturday at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn.

The legal clinic on Thursday, sponsored by the [City Bar Justice Center](#) and the New York chapter of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, was the largest in the city since the earthquake.

For three hours, dozens of Haitian immigrants filed through the grand foyer of the New York City Bar building in Midtown Manhattan, and up to two large conference rooms. There, more than 180 volunteer lawyers, paralegals and interpreters explained the new designation — in English, French and Creole — and helped fill out applications.

In all, 83 people came seeking help, a lower turnout than expected. Participants wondered whether some immigrants stayed away out of fear that the promise of confidentiality was not airtight; because of the cost of applying (as much as \$470), or because of the location, a long commute from the densest concentrations of Haitians in Brooklyn and Queens.

“That was a big, open question for us, whether people would come to this site,” said Lynn Kelly, executive director of the Justice Center. But organizers decided that the Midtown location was most convenient to the greatest number of volunteer lawyers, she said.

Still, many clients who came seemed relieved, even exhilarated, to begin the process. Some said the new status would allow them to find legal work and help support relatives in Haiti. Others said they hoped to apply for government financial aid for college.

Nadia Exantus, 34, said she had been in the United States illegally since 2006, when she had to leave Port-au-Prince because she could not support her family. She left her two children with an aunt, flew to Mexico, and sneaked across the United States border on foot. Detained, then released, by immigration officials, she made her way to New York.

She has since worked as a baby sitter and a hair braider, and received financial help from a brother in New York. Meanwhile, the aunt caring for her children died in the earthquake.

Ms. Exantus said she hoped the new status would give her legal footing to bring the children, now 4 and 6, to the United States. “I’m living on hope,” she said.

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