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# Green Cards

**Warning:** Some of this information may be outdated due to the 2025 executive orders. Please consider consulting an immigration lawyer if you have questions about your situation. You can also [read the President's executive orders](#).

A green card is proof that you are a “lawful permanent resident” (LPR). This means you can work and live here without needing to become a U.S. citizen. Green card holders do not need employment authorization to work, and are eligible for unrestricted social security cards. However, anyone can still lose a green card for minimal criminal activity or leaving the United States for too long.

Your best chance at getting a green card will be through the help of a trained and knowledgeable lawyer.

## How Do You Get a Green Card?

### **Immigrant Visa + Residence Application = Green Card**

Having lawful permanent residence always requires two steps:

- Apply for an immigrant visa
- Apply for residence

Some lucky people can apply for both their immigrant visa and their residence at the same time, while other people have to wait decades between the two steps. Your lawyer can help you understand what your process will look like based on your personal situation.

## **Step 1: Apply for an Immigrant Visa**

## What is An Immigrant Visa?

There are two types of visas: immigrant and nonimmigrant. Immigrant visas let you apply for lawful permanent residency and stay as long as you like. Nonimmigrant visas only allow you to stay for a specific timeframe. Basically, with a nonimmigrant visa you know that your time in the United States is limited before you arrive. Immigrant visas, on the other hand, are meant for you to stay permanently.

### Immigrant Visa Examples

[Family-Based](#)

[Victim of Domestic Violence \(VAWA\)](#)

[Special Immigrant Religious Worker](#)

### Non-Immigrant Visa Examples

Tourist

Student

Seasonal Work

## Getting the Right Immigrant Visa Will Help Your Chances of Getting a Green Card

**The trick to getting a green card is to pick the right immigrant visa.** There are a number of reasons why United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) will not give you a green card, and some immigrant visas make it easier to get around those reasons than others. Your lawyer will help you understand which visas you are eligible for, and make sure that your immigrant petition gives you the best chance of getting a green card.

## Paths to Lawful Permanent Residency

### Statuses an Immigrant Visas

There are many paths to lawful permanent residency, or a green card, but we will only review the ones that fall under our areas of expertise. Some of the following options are immigrant visas, while others are immigrant statuses or protections that would allow you to stay in the United States. Each will offer you a different approach to getting a green card, but more importantly, each comes with its own set of limitations.

### Asylum

Asylum protects people from persecution of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or something called “particular social group”. Generally, someone must apply for asylum within one year of arriving in the United States. It can be a painfully long and confusing process. If you qualify for asylum, you will want an experienced lawyer to guide you through your application. Learn more in our [Asylum article](#).

## **Diversity Visa Lottery**

The Diversity Visa Lottery helps people from some countries with historically low rates of immigration to the United States become lawful permanent residents. The drawing happens once per year, in the Fall. However, winning the lottery is no guarantee that you will get a green card. You should look for competent legal representation to help you. Learn more in our [Diversity Visa Lottery article](#).

## **Family-Based**

To help families stay together, family based immigration allows certain family members to apply for immigrant visas on each other’s behalf. For example, lawful permanent residents may apply for green cards for their spouses. Sometimes this can be a fairly quick process, and other times it can take years. Look for a competent lawyer who can help you understand the process and keep your family together. Learn more in our [Family-Based Visa article](#).

## **Refugee**

Fleeing persecution, refugees are granted permission to come to the United States before they arrive. They often come with almost nothing. Within a short time, many must learn a new language and alphabet, how to drive and how to manage money. It can be a confusing journey, but it offers them the chance of having a safe life for themselves and their children. Learn more in our [Refugee article](#).

## **Religious**

Religious based immigration offers employment opportunities and potential lawful permanent residency to certain religious workers. Each stage of the process has its own rules, forms and payments. Few attorneys practice in this area, so be sure to find a lawyer who understands the special rules for religious workers. Learn in our [Religious Vias article](#).

## Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS)

Abused and abandoned children may be eligible to self-petition for something called “Special Immigrant Juvenile Status.” First, a state court must find that it is in the child’s best interests not to return to his or her home country. That court order becomes part of the application to immigrate. Finding the right legal help is important because an unsuccessful applicant could be put into deportation. Learn more in our [Special Immigrant Juvenile Status article](#).

## Victim of Domestic Abuse and Other Crimes

There are special protections for immigrants who are victims of domestic violence and other crimes. Oftentimes, these protections will also help a victim’s family members obtain residency. Finding your best option will require the help of a knowledgeable attorney who can make sure you navigate the process correctly.

- **U Non-Immigrant Status**

- U helps victims of certain crimes get lawful immigration status if they cooperate with the police in any criminal investigation and prosecution. There are a number of requirements for U visas, but you can also include certain family members on your application. Once you have U nonimmigrant status, you must wait an additional three years before applying for lawful permanent residency. Learn more in our [U Non-Immigrant Status article](#).

- **VAWA (Violence Against Women Act) Self-Petition**

- The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) is a gender neutral law that helps both men and women leave abusive relationships. It allows people to petition for themselves, free of charge, when they would otherwise have to depend on an abusive family member to help them with Immigration. VAWA can be used as either a self-petition for protection, or as a deportation defense. On this page we will discuss the VAWA self-petition as a protection, which you prepare yourself and mail into Immigration. Learn more in our [VAWA article](#).

## Step 2: Apply for Residency

### Adjustment of Status or Consular Processing

When you apply for residence, you will either apply for what's called an "adjustment of status" or "consular processing." Adjustment of Status is the process of getting your green card without ever leaving the United States. Consular Processing means that you have to leave the United States and finish the process in your home country. The route you take is largely based on the kind of immigrant visa you have and your immigration history. But any number of factors may influence this decision. Applying for the wrong residence process may not only cost you significantly more money, but may ruin your chances of ever getting a green card. Rely on the expertise of a competent lawyer to help you determine your best option.

Adjustment of Status is less expensive in the long run and faster. It is hard to imagine anyone who would prefer to go through Consular Processing rather than Adjustment of Status. Unfortunately, many people are not qualified for it, and are stuck with Consular Processing. However, there are two old laws that many people forget about but that might help you be eligible for Adjustment of Status.

1. If someone petitioned for you before January 14, 1998, you might be eligible to pay a \$1,000 fine and Adjust Status rather than Consular Process. This is true whether you are a primary or derivative beneficiary.
2. If someone petitioned for you before April 30, 2001 AND you were in the United States on December 21, 2001, you might be eligible to pay a \$1,000 fine and do Adjustment of Status rather than Consular Processing. Again, this is true regardless of whether you are a primary or a derivative beneficiary.

These two laws can be confusing, but think back and consider if either could apply to you. If so, ask your immigration attorney if you can adjust status.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

Last updated on August 11, 2025.

Can I travel outside of the United States once I have my green card?

Yes, you can travel. However, a couple of warnings:

First, if you have had any problems with law enforcement, talk to an immigration attorney before leaving the United States. Certain criminal convictions may make it impossible for you to re-enter the United States regardless of how long you have

been a lawful permanent resident or how much family you have here.

Second, if you leave the United States for too long, the United States may say that you have abandoned your residency. If you plan to leave for more than 180 days, talk to a good attorney before you leave, because technically that timeframe would force you to reapply for admission. Your extended time away might also affect the amount of time you need to spend in the United States as a lawful permanent resident before you can apply for citizenship.

Third, if you are an asylee, you should not go back to the country from which you claim persecution until you are a United States citizen.

After I receive my green card, how long do I have to wait until I can apply for citizenship?

- Married to and living with a US Citizen: 3 years
- Otherwise: 5 years

How do I renew my green card?

Glad you asked. Check out our [Green Card Renewal](#) article for more information.

[Green Cards Options for Status, Visas, Permits & Papers Immigration](#)

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