

Talking with Clients Expressing Fear and Distress Related to Potential Immigration Enforcement Actions

Increased anti-immigrant rhetoric and the potential of widespread immigration enforcement actions have caused some individuals and communities to have heightened anxiety, fear, and distress. These clients may turn to their mental health providers with questions and concerns. This document offers general guidance and supportive resources to help providers effectively respond.

Be Prepared

Providers should be prepared for a wide range of questions, many of which they will be unable to answer. Regardless of their ability to answer, providers should provide a warm, supportive response and ideally connect their client to accurate and trusted information.

Some client questions are likely to be speculative in nature, such as “What will happen to me or my family?” Uncertainty heightens anxiety and so it is normal for people to want clarity about the future. Providers should answer speculative questions by:

- Validating the question and the emotion behind the questions.

For example:

| *That’s a good question, and it makes sense that you are anxious about what will happen in the future.*

- Asking clarifying questions.

For example:

| *Did you have a specific concern for you and your family?*

- Depending on the answer to the question, provide in-language resources or connection to services and supports.

For example:

I am not the best person to answer that question. I would like to connect you to... or Here is some information about that subject that I think could give you some of the information you need.

Some client questions may be legal and individualized in nature and would therefore require assistance from an immigration lawyer or Department of Justice accredited representative. Mental health providers should be careful not to provide any immigration advice as this has great potential to cause harm. Clients are likely to have a variety of immigration statuses, many of which do not have an increased risk of immigration enforcement actions; however, everyone's circumstances are different and only attorneys or DOJ accredited representatives can appropriately assess someone's situation and provide advice. Providing information outside of your training and scope of expertise could put a client at risk. The first best step for someone who is concerned about their immigration status is to speak to an immigration lawyer or Department of Justice-accredited legal representative about their options.

"That is an important question, and I want to make sure you get accurate information so you can make the best decisions for yourself and your family. Unfortunately, I am not an attorney or trained in immigration policy and procedure. It would be best for you to talk to someone who is so they can understand your situation and give you correct information. Would you like a referral to an attorney?"

Organize Resources

Have accurate information available in clients' languages. It is important to give people accurate information so they understand the rights and the resources that may be available to them in their community. Some resources that may be helpful include:

- **Know Your Rights Support**
 - The [Immigrant Legal Resource Center \(ILRC\)](#) has created [Red Cards](#), which help people assert their rights and defend themselves in many situations, such as when ICE agents go to a home. Cards are available at the ILRC website in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Haitian, Hmong, Korean, Punjabi, Russian, Tagalog, Tigrinya, Ukrainian and Vietnamese. ILRC also offers a [guide for using red cards](#) in your organization, and an illustrated, [multilingual guide](#) for how clients can use red cards.

- The ACLU has a [webpage](#) in English and Spanish that provides immigrant rights in different scenarios.
- The [Immigrant Defense Project](#) has [Know Your Rights with ICE](#) flyers in English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Tagalog, Haitian Creole, Hindi, Bangla, Punjabi, Arabic, Urdu, Simplified and Traditional Mandarin, Korean, Russian, and Hebrew.
- **[Patient Rights Flyer](#)**: These flyers provide information about patient rights (regardless of immigration status) in hospital settings. These flyers are particularly helpful in states where laws requiring hospitals to ask about immigration status have been passed, including Texas and Florida. Flyers are available in Arabic, Haitian Creole, Dari, English, French, Kinyarwanda, Spanish, and Swahili.
- **Hate Crimes and Hate Incidences** – The International Rescue Committee has two documents to support providers and clients who may be affected by hate crimes and hate incidences.
 - [Staying Safe Against Hate](#) in English, Dari, Pashto, Spanish, Arabic, French, Haitian Creole, and Swahili.
 - [Supporting Children and Youth Impacted by Hate Crimes and Hate Incidences](#) in English, Dari, Pashto, Spanish, Arabic, French, Haitian Creole, and Swahili.
- **Where clients can find a pro- or low-bono immigration attorney.** Providers can search for immigration legal services providers by state, county, or detention facility at the [National Immigration Legal Services Directory](#). During times with increased uncertainty and fear, unscrupulous people try to take advantage of desperate clients. Providers should also make resources available to educate clients about immigration scammers and fraud. The American Immigration Lawyers Association has flyers available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#) as well as a website stopnotariofraud.org that has videos available in numerous languages.
- **Family Preparedness.** If families are at increased risk of immigration enforcement action, it is important to have a family preparedness plan to reduce the stress about the unexpected. The Immigrant Legal Resource Center has a family preparedness workplan available in [English](#), [Spanish](#), and [Chinese](#).
- **[What You Need to Know if You Do Not have a Green Card or U.S. Citizenship](#)**: This handout provides important information for those with different immigration status, focusing on impacts of the 2024 Presidential election. It is not a substitute for legal advice from an immigration attorney or accredited representative, and the information is only applicable until January 20, 2025. It is available in Arabic, Burmese, Haitian Creole, Dari, English, French, Kinyarwanda, Pashtu, Russian, Spanish, Swahili, and Ukrainian.

Know what local support may be available in your community and how to refer clients. This includes mental health, ethnic community-based organizations, faith-based institutions, legal resources, basic needs, and more. If there are immigrations rights and support organizations in your area, it is important to connect with them and understand what resources they may offer. You can find resources by exploring 2-1-1 in your area.

Connect your clients with a local immigrant’s right coalition or network that speaks their language. These will differ by local geographic context. Providers can search “immigrant rights” + “language or country of origin” + “city”.

Engaging with Clients

Open the conversation or respond to client’s questions in a compassionate and measured way that does not lead to increased fear.

“We understand that some of the families we work with have fears about immigration enforcement actions. Although times are uncertain, we are here to offer you support. Here is some information that might be helpful to you.”

Expect a wide range of emotions including but not limited to fear, anger, denial, and more. Providers should:

- **Utilize active listening skills** to calm and orient people who may be overwhelmed or fearful. Provide space and time for them to be able to express their emotions without jumping to problem solving. Validate concerns and normalize the range of emotions clients may be feeling.

Examples of what you can say:

*I think a lot of people are feeling the same way right now.
That sounds like a normal response.
I can see how upsetting this is for you.*

- **Ask questions that are non-intrusive, compassionate, and helpful** in identifying needs and concerns so that you can provide the right information or refer people to the right supports. In conversation, do not share additional stories or rumors as sharing them may increase distress. Do not engage in political discussions or rhetoric as it can be a boundary violation and can also heighten distress.

Examples of helpful questions can be:

Can you tell me what worries you the most?

What specific questions do you have?

What information do you feel you need?

- **Acknowledge what you do not know while pointing clients to information that is accurate.** You can help acknowledge that you do not know the answer, while also helping ground the clients in what is known now. **For example:**

"I wish I knew the answer to that. Unfortunately, I don't. However, there are some steps now that could help you prepare no matter what happens, like knowing your rights. Here is some information which we can go over together."

Encourage clients to use coping skills and seek support from family, friends, and community groups during this uncertain time.

For example:

- Ask clients what they have done in the past to get them through an anxious or difficult time, then explore how they can dedicate time to do these things now.
- Teach and practice coping skills like breathing or grounding techniques with clients.
- Help clients reflect on safe and supportive people that they can go to when they are worried or distressed.

You can ask:

Who do you go to that supports you?

Who can you talk to when you are worried or upset?