



## VLA Frequently Asked Questions

### **General Questions:**

Q. How does the application process work?

*Please send your application materials to Niki Fitzgerald at [apply@asylumaccess.org](mailto:apply@asylumaccess.org). If you are interested in applying to more than one office, you need only send one application, and you may explain your preferences and interests in your cover letter.*

#### **Application Materials (Required):**

- 1) cover letter (including the date you expect to be available, all languages you speak, any other skills you possess that would be helpful to Asylum Access, and your reasons for wanting to volunteer with us)
- 2) 1-2 page resume
- 3) writing sample (ideally an analytical, legal writing, or editorial piece)

Q. When should I apply? Do VLA programs begin on specific dates?

*Typically, a new group of VLAs are accepted every 3 to 6 months. Therefore, we accept applications and offer acceptances on a rolling basis.*

Q. How many hours per week is a volunteer expected to work?

*VLAs are full-time volunteers. We expect that you will work approximately 40 hours per week. If you work more than 40 hours in a week, the local leadership staff may, at their discretion, allow you to take compensatory time off at a mutually-convenient later date, up to an amount equal to the excess time you worked.*

Q. Am I entitled to leave or time off during my volunteer experience?

*Volunteer personnel are entitled to one week of "Rest & Relaxation" per three months of work at an Asylum Access office. This R & R must be coordinated with and approved by the volunteer's immediate supervisor at least two weeks prior to the desired dates. Approval of specific dates for R & R is at the discretion of the volunteer's immediate supervisor and may need to be adjusted to meet the needs of the local office and/or the realities of transportation out of the Asylum Access office.*

Q. Can I speak with a former volunteer?

*Asylum Access VLAs are always happy to be in touch with future VLAs. However, due to the high number of inquiries we cannot put candidates in contact with a VLA until he or she is pre-selected for an interview. In the meantime, please refer to Asylum Access's "A Day in the Life" series on our website, which profiles previous volunteers. If you have pressing questions that you would like answered prior to applying, please direct inquiries to Niki Fitzgerald at [apply@asylumaccess.org](mailto:apply@asylumaccess.org).*



Q. What type of a visa will I need? Can Asylum Access help me to get my visa?

*Asylum Access will make every effort to provide VLAs with accurate and timely information regarding visa requirements for foreigners travelling to office countries. VLAs, however, must take primary responsibility for ensuring that they meet all visa requirements. Asylum Access is not responsible for any additional costs incurred by a VLA in connection with compliance with visa requirements.*

Q. Am I required to have health and travel insurance?

*All VLAs are required to carry valid and current medical and travel/evacuation insurance, copies of which must be filed with Asylum Access prior to the beginning of the volunteer program. You must sign and submit a Proof of Insurance Form to Asylum Access in order to participate in the Volunteer Legal Advocate program and/or to engage in any volunteer work with an Asylum Access office outside the U.S. Medical and travel/evacuation insurance policies must be adequate to cover injuries or illnesses that you may sustain while working in an Asylum Access office and must provide for evacuation in an emergency situation. All VLAs assume sole responsibility for payment in full of all costs of medical care they may receive overseas and evacuation expenses.*

Q. What is my financial responsibility as a volunteer?

*VLAs are responsible for arranging and paying for all travel to and from their volunteer destination. The VLA is also responsible for pre-travel medical expenses (i.e. vaccinations) and health insurance as well as room and board while volunteering abroad. Asylum Access is unable to provide any direct financial assistance to VLAs.*

Q. Can Asylum Access help me with fundraising for my trip?

*Below is a list of potential funding opportunities for VLAs. Generally, it is the VLA's responsibility to apply and secure funding, however, Asylum Access will gladly write letters of recommendation, provide examples of successful fundraising appeals, and provide information regarding the program if requested.*

*Occasionally, law schools set up post graduate fellowships for top-performing recent graduates to work with Asylum Access. To get more information on this or to enquire about setting up a fellowship with your law school, please contact [niki.fitzgerald@asylumaccess.org](mailto:niki.fitzgerald@asylumaccess.org).*

*Other resources for funding are:*

<http://www.hrla.org.uk> - Bursary Scheme

<http://www.jgfa.net/fellowprog.htm>

<http://www.skaddenfellowships.org/sitecontent.cfm?page=summaryOfDates>

<http://www.law.yale.edu/stuorgs/8434.htm>

[http://www.abanet.org/legalservices/probono/lawschools/pi\\_postgrad\\_fellowships.html](http://www.abanet.org/legalservices/probono/lawschools/pi_postgrad_fellowships.html)



<http://www.pslawnet.org/informationandresources>  
<http://www.maggiofellowship.org/>  
<http://www.asil.org/helton-guidelines.cfm>  
<http://www.compact.org/category/events-jobs-grants-more/grants-and-fellowships/>  
[http://www.nationalgridus.com/commitment/d4-1\\_award.asp](http://www.nationalgridus.com/commitment/d4-1_award.asp)  
<http://www.rotary.org>  
<http://www.soros.org/grants>  
[http://www.nationalgridus.com/masselectric/about\\_us/award.asp](http://www.nationalgridus.com/masselectric/about_us/award.asp)  
<http://www.casefellowships.org/index.html>

Q. Can I get university or college credit for my work as a VLA?

*Asylum Access is happy to support a VLA's request for credit for a volunteer position by providing a letter of support or other reasonable requirements. Negotiating credit with your university is the primary responsibility of the volunteer.*

Q. Do you take deferred associates?

*Yes. However, commitment to and experience in public interest law is a factor in hiring.*

Q. Can I maintain my CLE requirement while I am abroad?

*In most cases VLAs should be able to maintain their CLE requirements via online or distance learning. Different state bar associations have different CLE requirements. VLAs should consult with their individual bar associations to ensure they stay current with the requirements of their state.*

Q. What makes a successful volunteer?

*Successful volunteers are cooperative, extremely flexible and very patient. They have strong work ethics and are able to adapt to multicultural environments. VLAs work with staff and volunteers from around the world. They are respectful of their host country and its culture, and have positive attitudes.*

#### **Office Specific Questions:**

Q. What is the average day like for a Volunteer Legal Advocate? What kind of work will I be doing?

*Volunteer legal advocates receive intensive training in international refugee law, and practice before local offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or local refugee status adjudicators. Volunteers may also have the opportunity to engage in policy advocacy at a national or international level. Generally, VLA's will be expected to meet with clients, research and write testimonies and legal briefs and conduct community education sessions.*



*AAE: The primary responsibility of a VLA is assisting clients in our legal clinic. This involves interviewing a client to understand what needs he or she may have and taking appropriate action, including writing appeals for clients who have been denied refugee status. At times VLAs accompany clients to help them obtain governmental services, such as reporting crimes or getting access to banks or schools. They may also be involved in mediation disputes with employers.*

*AAT: VLAs spend most of their time meeting with clients and trying to help them articulate what has happened to them in a way that will convince UNHCR that they meet the definition of a refugee. VLAs spend about 40% of their time meeting clients, 40% of their time researching and writing testimonies and legal briefs and 20% conducting community education sessions, interpreter training, drafting country condition briefs, and other miscellaneous tasks related to refugee legal assistance.*

*AATZ: The average day of a VLA usually involves one or two intake interviews, maybe a secondary interview, writing documents or doing research on behalf of clients, and working on some larger policy advocacy project. VLAs will also be involved in community legal education and meeting with outside organizations, but that is not a daily activity.*

Q. What is the time commitment for VLA's? Why so long?

*The minimum time commitment varies with each office. A significant amount of time is required to train new VLA's, get accustomed to the work environment and develop relationships with clients. Therefore, AA encourages volunteers to stay as long as possible to ensure a beneficial experience for all involved.*

*AAE: We require a minimum time commitment of 6 months.*

*AAT: We require a minimum time commitment of 6 months.*

*AATZ: We require a minimum time commitment of 6 months.*

Q. What are the language requirements for Volunteer Legal Advocates?

*AAE: Spanish is required, English and French are preferred.*

*AAT: English is required, Thai is preferred. Tamil, Urdu, French, and Mandarin would be helpful.*

*AATZ: English is required, French and Swahili are preferred.*

Q. How many years of experience would you like the VLA to have? Is a law degree required?

*AAE: We strongly prefer candidates with a law degree and some experience working with refugees, migrants, or other vulnerable populations. We will consider, however, candidates without law degrees who have at least one year of refugee law experience.*

*AAT: 1-2 years of experience working with refugees would be helpful. A law degree is not required but it is very helpful for the VLA to have studied law in some capacity as much of their work requires*



*legal analysis.*

*AATZ: There is no one profile that we look for in a VLA applicant. We definitely want people with law degrees, and also experience working in the field, but people right out of law school are welcome and usually make up the bulk of our staff. We also welcome applications from people without law degrees. The focus of their work here will be different from attorney volunteers, but they will still have client interaction if they wish and contribute invaluablely to our organization.*

Q. Where do most volunteers live while they are working for AA? Are you able to help volunteers find housing?

*AAE: Volunteers typically live in single or shared apartments in Quito. The AAE office is in the Mariscal neighborhood, so volunteers tend to live as far south as the Centro Historico and as far north as the Parque Carolina neighborhood. Different neighborhoods have different qualities (security, price, luxury, etc.). Apartments are listed every Sunday in the local paper, but we can help you email the community of ex-patriots working in various NGOs around town. Often there are people looking for roommates.*

*AAT: Most volunteers live in studio apartments located near the office. AAT works with a real estate agency that assists volunteers in finding affordable and convenient housing. Many VLAs live near the office: in the Suttisan, Ari and Saphan Qwai areas of Bangkok.*

*AATZ: Volunteers live in a variety of different places--apartments (especially if they are staying for longer periods of time), subletting rooms, with family or friends. We can provide some general information, and we are developing our knowledge of housing in the city, but we cannot secure housing for you before you reach Dar. We can find a place for you to stay temporarily.*

Q. Is it safe for foreigners to live and work abroad with AA? Is security a big concern?

*AAE: One must take extra precautions to ensure personal safety in Ecuador. Part of VLA training includes some pointers on how to avoid high-risk situations. But with some simple precautions, you should be able to live without undue concern of your safety. Ecuador is and has been a relatively stable country. As for as being a foreigner goes, Quito in particular is quite cosmopolitan and has a large tourist population, so it is not unusual to see foreigners on the street.*

*AAT: Bangkok is a relatively safe city. The Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) says: "Bangkok enjoys a relatively low overall crime rate when compared to its urban counterparts in the U.S. and Europe. Generally, it is a safe place for those wishing to conduct business as well as those taking part in the myriad of tourist activities. Most criminal activity is limited to "non-confrontational" street crimes such as pocket picking, purse snatching and credit card theft. The local police are effective in assisting with minor crimes, but are continually hampered by a lack of funding and adequate training."*

*Even though it is relatively safe, it's good to keep in mind that Bangkok has a population of 12 million people so one should take the normal precautions that would be taken in any city that is so large.*



*AATZ: Dar es Salaam is a fairly safe city and Tanzania is a stable country, especially in relation to most of the countries that surround it. While security is not a big concern, it is always good to avoid taking unnecessary risks, as in any place.*

Q. Are there particular health concerns that I need to be aware of? What is the availability of health care services like for volunteers?

*AAE: Ecuador has world class emergency facilities and medical attention. All VLAs are required to have international health insurance, and everyone should get their vaccinations updated before arriving. Quito is not in a malarial zone, though if you wish to travel to the Amazon region of Ecuador during your stay, this may be a consideration. Quito is above 9000ft, and it usually takes people a week or so to adjust to the altitude. This should pose no long-term concerns, however. Volunteers receive some training on health issues, and should take basic food safety precautions while living in Ecuador.*

*AAT: Health care facilities are very good in Thailand and generally cheaper than similar services in the United States. Health risks in Bangkok include, pollution related respiratory problems, HIV prevalence, occasional swine flu outbreaks, some malaria and dengue fever. Also it is recommended that individuals drink bottled or filtered water while in Bangkok. A good website to consult for further health related tips for expats is:*

*<http://www.bupa-intl.com/health/in-our-perspective/thailand-expat-health-guide>*

*AATZ: Malaria is always a concern, and though the particular strain of Malaria in TZ is not the most destructive, it is good to be on a prophylactic. You can't drink tap water as it often carries stomach parasites, and you have to be a little careful with street food as sometimes it is undercooked.*

Q. What kind of a budget do most volunteers live on?

*Due to several factors, such as currency volatility and individual standard of living, it is difficult to accurately list an average budget. For more information about Ecuador, Thailand and Tanzania, please conduct research to determine your comfort level.*

*AAE: <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/ecuador>*

*AAT: <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thailand>*

*AATZ: <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/tanzania>*

Q. How long has Asylum Access been operating abroad?

*AAE: Asylum Access has been operating in Ecuador since 2007.*

*AAT: Asylum Access has been operating in Thailand since 2007.*

*AATZ: Asylum Access has been operating in Tanzania since the summer of 2009.*

