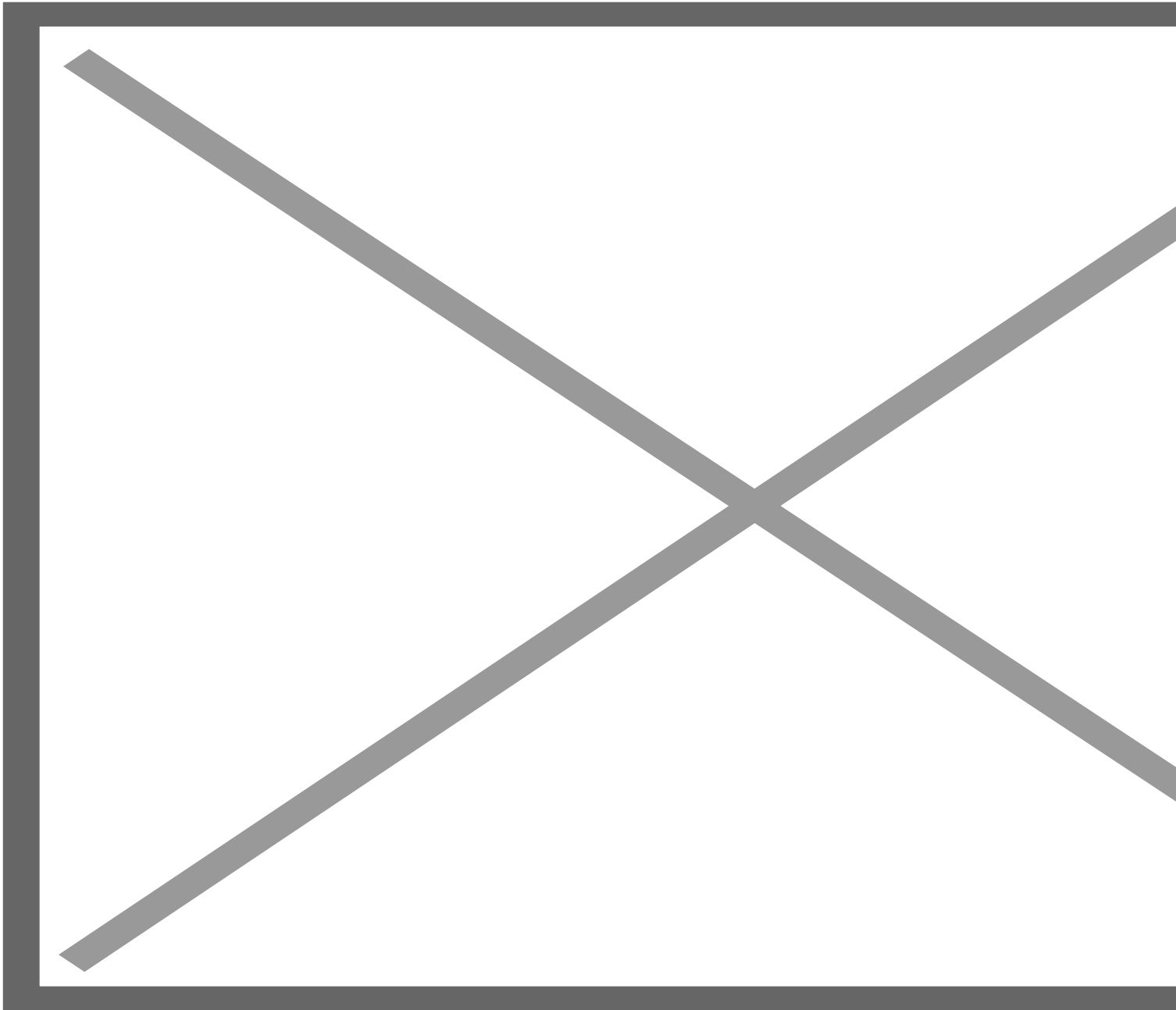


Religious workers get small immigration win, but hundreds still at risk

by [Emma Maple](#)

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(Unsplash photo by Annie M)

Foreign-born religious workers, who have been hoping for changes to the temporary visa process, recently celebrated a small win. In January, the US Department of Homeland Security said, foreign religious workers whose temporary visas have expired [no longer have to live](#) outside the United States for one year before they can return.

But the fight to change the immigration process for religious workers, including priests, nuns, and rabbis, is not over yet.

Religious workers usually come to the US on an R-1 visa, which can allow people to stay in the United States for a total of five years. Religious workers are eligible also for EB-4 visas, a category that is essentially a catch-all for a variety of subgroups and [is capped](#) at around 10,000 visas per year.

In 2023, the US Department of State [changed how it processed](#) EB-4 visas, driving up demand and leading to a backlog that will take years to slog through. Prior to these changes, religious workers could typically obtain green cards while they were in the US on their temporary visas, reducing interruptions for congregations.

The end goal for many religious leaders is permanent residency, but temporary visas have become more important in recent years as permanent residency becomes harder to obtain.

Right now, the biggest barrier to obtaining permanent residency is that it takes too long, according to Miguel Naranjo, director of Religious Immigration Services at the [Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.](#)

As people's R-1 visas near their due date, Naranjo said it's rare that he gets to deliver happy news about the status of their permanent residency. Instead, many religious workers are forced to leave the US and hope for another temporary visa in order to continue serving their constituents.

That's not an easy process, either. Naranjo said common challenges that people face are travel [bans enforced](#) on people from certain countries and increased scrutiny of their social media presence.

As of last fall, people applying for R-1 visas are also required to conduct their visa interview in their country of nationality or residence, rather than a third-party country. Interviewing in a third-party country [often made the process easier](#), either due to proximity to the US or friendliness to the visa applicant, according to Global Sisters Report.

Narajano said he gives credit to the DHS for eliminating the one-year abroad requirement, but it's not a perfect solution.

"The religious worker is still required to depart at the end of five years, but they don't have to sit out a full year," he said.

In a perfect world, he said, religious workers shouldn't have to leave the country at all in order to apply for a new visa. —FaVs News

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