

Matthew Wilch
Biographical Information

Matthew "Matt" Wilch has worked in human rights advocacy and service on behalf of refugees and immigrants for over twenty-five years. He began this work in 1987 as part of the Valley Religious Task Force on Central America (Phoenix, Arizona), coordinating social services and overseeing Casa Santiago, a shelter for Central American asylum seekers.

From 1992 to 1998, he served as staff attorney and executive director for the Florence Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project (Florence Project) that provides legal services for detained asylum seekers and immigrants in Arizona. The agency served thousands of individuals during those years and developed what has become a national model for delivering detention legal services (the so-called Legal Orientation Program). In addition to providing group presentations and representing people in asylum and humanitarian waiver hearings, Matt spent his days welcoming visitors and helping to lead national advocacy for federal funding for detainee legal services. Under his leadership, the Florence Project joined with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) and Catholic Legal Immigration Network (CLINC) to found the Detention Watch Network (DWN), a national network founded to galvanize service and advocacy efforts for detainees. Then Attorney General Janet Reno awarded the Florence Project with the agency's Public Service Award.

In 1999, Matt began nearly ten years of service with LIRS, including work as director of asylum and immigration concerns, director of policy, and senior counsel for policy and advocacy. He continued to help push for federal funding of legal services in detention and helped to start the Detained Torture Survivor Legal Support Network, a legal service program for detained torture survivors. He coordinated DWN advocacy to help fight for improved standards and conditions, better access to legal counsel, alternatives to detention, and release from indefinite detention. He wrote about and advocated for comprehensive immigration reform and later served as chair of the Protection Committee for Refugee Council, USA. During this period, Congress finally began funding detainee legal services, the so-called Legal Orientation Program (based on the Florence Project's legal service model). He also helped to draw attention to groups of forgotten refugees, such as over 960 asylum seekers from Burma who were stranded in Guam, and helped successfully advocate for immediate emergency aid for the group and eventually asylum in the United States. In 2009, the American Immigration Lawyers Association awarded Matt the Arthur Helton Human Rights Award.

After his time at LIRS, he worked as a pro bono refugee protection advocate and consultant, advocating for a large group of Chin refugees from Burma who remain in a protracted refugee situation in India. He was the lead writer and researcher of *Seeking Refuge: The Chin People in Mizoram State, India*, a 134-page assessment with recommendations and statements of support for Chins, a minority ethnic group from Burma, helped lead efforts to share Chins' stories and build bridges between Chins in Mizoram and concerned governments, NGO groups, and churches.

Matt now works for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in Washington, D.C. He develops and advocates for refugee and asylum protection policy, including the need for comprehensive immigration reform to include reform of U.S. asylum and removal laws. He serves as USCCB's representative on the Refugee Counsel USA (RCUSA) Advocacy Committee, and advocates with the U.S. administrative agencies, UNHCR, and Congress. He represents USCCB at UNHCR Geneva meetings and is involved in refugee and asylum field evaluations to seek solutions to neglected or urgent U.S. and international protection situations.

Matt received his BA from St. John's University (MN), his JD from Arizona State University, and Spanish language training from Centro de Linguistico Maya (Guatemala).