

September 7, 2020

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Lauren Alder Reid
Assistant Director, Office of Policy
Executive Office for Immigration Review
5107 Leesburg Pike, Suite 2500
Falls Church, VA 22041

**Re: Comment in Response to the Information Collection at OMB
Control Number 1125-0012**

Dear Assistant Director Reid,

The Tahirih Justice Center¹ (Tahirih) submits the following comments in response to the Information Collection, OMB Control Number 1125-0012, issued by the Department of Justice on July 13, 2020 pursuant to the Paperwork Reduction Act.

Introduction

Tahirih is a national, nonpartisan policy and direct services organization that has answered calls for help from nearly 29,000 immigrant survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) since its inception twenty-three years ago. Our clients are primarily women and girls who endure horrific human rights abuses such as domestic violence, rape and sexual torture, widow rituals, forced marriage, human trafficking, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), and “honor” crimes.² We provide free legal and social services to help our clients find safety and justice as they engage in the daunting, courageous, and rewarding work of rebuilding their lives and contributing to their communities.

Tahirih’s Virginia office has been a recognized agency since March 22, 2010, and its Houston office has been recognized since December 7, 2010.³ On July 10, 2020, Tahirih’s agency recognition was renewed and its request to extend its recognition to all of its four branch offices (Houston, TX; Baltimore, MD; San

¹ <https://www.tahirih.org/>

² For background information on these types of gender-based violence, see, e.g., UNHCR, *Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women* 17, <https://www.unhcr.org/3d4f915e4.html>; UN Women, *Defining “honour” crimes and “honour” killings*, <https://endvawnow.org/en/articles/731-defining-honourcrimes-and-honour-killings.html>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Female_genital_mutilation; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forced_marriage.

³ <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/recognized-organizations-and-accredited-representatives-roster-state-and-city>

ATLANTA

230 Peachtree Street NW
Atlanta, GA 30303
Suite 1960
Tel: 470-481-4700
Fax: 470-481-7400
Atlanta@tahirih.org

BALTIMORE

211 E. Lombard Street
Suite 307
Baltimore, MD 21202
Tel: 410-999-1900
Fax: 410-630-7539
Baltimore@tahirih.org

GREATER DC | NATIONAL

6400 Arlington Boulevard
Suite 400
Falls Church, VA 22042
Tel: 571-282-6161
Fax: 571-282-6162
TTY: 711
GreaterDC@tahirih.org
Justice@tahirih.org

HOUSTON

1717 St. James Place
Suite 450
Houston, TX 77056
Tel: 713-496-0100
Fax: 713-481-1793
Houston@tahirih.org

SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA

881 Sneath Lane
Suite 115
San Bruno, CA 94066
Tel: 650-270-2100
Fax: 650-466-0006
SFBayArea@tahirih.org

tahirih.org

Bruno, CA; and Atlanta, GA) was approved.⁴ Tahirih currently has three fully accredited representatives on staff, who provide critical support to expand Tahirih’s capacity to provide pro bono immigration legal services to survivors of gender-based violence.⁵

As further explained below, Tahirih objects to the Information Collection’s proposed revisions to the Form EOIR-31 Application for New, Renewed, or Extension of Agency recognition because its use: (1) exceeds the requirements set forth in regulations for agencies seeking recognition and representatives seeking accreditation, (2) place undo time and resource burdens on non-profit organizations and (3) disproportionately impacts less well-resourced organizations. On the whole, the proposed revisions to the form are contrary to the purpose of the R&A program, which is to “increase the availability of competent immigration legal representation for low-income and indigent persons, thereby promoting the effective and efficient administration of justice.”⁶

The agency’s estimate of the burden of the proposed collection of information is artificially low, and the proposed revisions would unnecessarily further increase the burden on applicant organizations.

The agency estimates that 129 respondents will complete the revised EOIR-31 form for new recognition in an average of 2 hours per response, and that 131 respondents will complete the form for renewal with an average of 7 hours per response.

These estimates do not comport with Tahirih’s recent experience in completing an application for renewal and extension of recognition. As discussed in more detail below, Tahirih used the January 2017 version of the EOIR-31 with fewer documentation and evidentiary requirements than those in the proposed revisions. Even as a well-resourced organization with strong practices and procedures for financial, data and information management, as well as streamlined processes to track services, it took the Director of Legal and Social Services more than 20 hours to prepare the form and accompanying documentation. It took an estimated 5-10 hours collectively of other staff who contributed to the drafting of affidavits, collection of required or recommended documentation, collating and copying, and preparing for filing the form. We expect that less well-resourced organizations would spend even more time to complete the form and relevant documentation as required by the proposed revisions.

Proposed Revisions to and Comments on the Information Collection Instrument – Form EOIR-31

Part 3 Does your organization have current non-profit status? Attach proof from appropriate state agency

Applicable regulations governing the R&A program do not require a state agency-issued non-profit designation.⁷ The regulation requires only organizing documents, including a statement of its mission or purpose. Additional evidence, including a state-

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/recognition-and-accreditation-program>

⁷ 8 CFR § 1292.11(b)

agency designation is *permissible* but not *required* by the regulation.⁸ The revised form exceeds the requirements of the regulation and increases the burden on applicant organizations. For example, in the Commonwealth of Virginia, a prerequisite to obtaining a Nonprofit Exemption is obtaining a federal nonprofit exemption from the Internal Revenue Service.⁹ The proposed form revision forces applicant organizations to secure, at time and monetary cost, additional and duplicative documentation from state authorities, when federal tax-exempt status – or a pending request for federal tax-exempt status - is already required by regulation. Further, the range of documentation permitted by regulation to establish non-profit status – such as funder reports, a description of services or federal tax records - meets the purpose while permitting reasonable flexibility for applicant programs.¹⁰

Instructions, Page 3, Part 3, Information About Organization

The proposed revisions to the instructions impose a higher burden of information collection than required by regulation. The applicable regulation requires the applicant organization to submit “[a] description of the immigration legal services that the organization seeks to offer.”¹¹ The proposed instructions revision exceeds the regulatory requirement and unnecessarily heighten the burden on organizations by requiring a “*detailed* description of the types of services it intends to provide if recognized. An organization that does currently offer immigration legal services must provide a *detailed description of the scope, nature, and history of these services, and by whom they have been provided.*” (emphasis added). This heightened burden would require applicant organizations to expend additional staff hours on data collection within their own organizations, to identify and document historic practices in which they might not have direct knowledge. The proposed level of detail is unnecessary to meet the purpose of the R&A program, which is to expand access to representation by permitting legitimate non-profit organizations – even those without significant organizational infrastructure or staffing – to provide competent immigration legal services to indigent immigrants.

Tahirih’s Director of Legal & Social Services prepared the organization’s 2020 renewal and extension of recognition application. Even at a well-resourced organization like Tahirih, with significant investments in technology for case management and information storage and management, Tahirih’s Director of Legal & Social Services spent more than 20 hours preparing the form and compiling documentation and statements in support of the application. Other staff, including an administrative assistant, data associate, director of finance, and chief of programs, contributed an estimated additional 5-10 hours of work in support of application preparation. At a smaller organization in which staff preparing the application also provide direct legal services, the increased burden of more detailed descriptions and documentation would serve to take time away from providing pro bono legal services to indigent immigrants. Such an effect runs plainly contrary to the purpose of the R&A program to expand access to legal services.

Extension of Recognition, Instructions, Page 5, and Form Part 7, Page 3

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ <https://www.tax.virginia.gov/nonprofit-organizations#:~:text=Requirements%20for%20Nonprofit%20Churches&text=Apply%20for%20a%20Virginia%20Tax,must%20be%20met%20to%20qualify>.

¹⁰ 8 CFR § 1292.11(b)(2).

¹¹ 8 CFR § 1292.11(e)

The proposed revisions to the instructions and form requiring specific types of documentary evidence in support of an extension request exceeds the level of detail and documentation required by regulation. The regulation requires an *attestation* that the organization “periodically conducts inspections of each such office or location, exercises supervision and control over its accredited representatives at those offices and locations, and provides access to adequate legal resources at each such office or location.”¹² The proposed revisions to the form and instructions raise the burden on applicants by requiring specific detail in the attestation about the frequency and nature of the inspections, what types of services each office performs, the management structure, and funding details for each office.

Non-profit organizations must work diligently to manage finite time and limited resources as efficiently as possible to maximize capacity to provide direct legal services to indigent immigrants. The imposition of additional detail requirements on the attestation, beyond regulatory requirements, creates additional time burdens that take away from the provision of direct services. Tahirih’s most recent recognition application took the designated authorized official more than 20 hours to prepare. The preparation of a detailed attestation – even with the benefit of a robust case management and data infrastructure – required at least an hour to prepare, and approximately an hour for review and signature by the relevant executive leader. This was time drawn away from critical legal program management work. Though a large, well-resourced organization like Tahirih can absorb this time burden, such requirements are less manageable by newer, smaller, or less-well-resourced organizations that provide critical services particularly in legal deserts. Tahirih is concerned that the proposed additional detail burden would cost critical time and resources for smaller organizations and could serve to deter smaller organizations from seeking recognition at all, even if they are eligible. This exacerbates the access to representation crisis and is contrary to the stated purpose of the R&A program to expand access to competent representation.

Conclusion

Use of the revised Form EOIR-31 and corresponding instructions will significantly increase the burden on legitimate non-profit organizations that seek initial, renewed, or extension of agency recognition. Such increased burden exceeds the requirements set forth in governing regulations and would make it more difficult and costly of time and resources for non-profit organizations to participate in the R&A program. The proposed revisions are unnecessarily burdensome and would not improve efficiency or efficacy of the R&A program in furtherance of its purpose to expand access to competent legal services to indigent immigrants.

We appreciate your careful consideration of these comments, look forward to your detailed feedback, and urge the agency to retain the January 2017 version of Form EOIR-31. Please contact me at kurstenp@tahirih.org or 571-356-9492 for additional information.

Respectfully,



Kursten A. Phelps
Co-Director of Client Advocacy (Legal)
Tahirih Justice Center

¹² 8 CFR § 1292.15