

Migrants in the Boston area rush to secure legal status amid concerns over upcoming election

By **Giulia McDonnell Nieto del Rio** Globe Staff, Updated July 20, 2024, 11:56 a.m.

CHELSEA — From her room in the emergency shelter at the former Chelsea Soldiers' Home, Stephanie Jean has been watching news clips on TikTok with a rising sense of dread: What will happen to her and her 4-year-old daughter, Cricia, if former president Donald Trump is elected in November?

Last week, as the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee [seethed with anti-immigrant rhetoric](#), Jean, a migrant from Haiti, continued her frantic search for a lawyer. As a Haitian who fled violence in her home country, she has temporary permission to be in the United States, but it is set to expire in less than two years. She is determined to apply for a longer-term form of immigration relief; becoming undocumented, she said, is “a huge fear.”

“If we are deported to Haiti, we will die,” said Jean, 29.

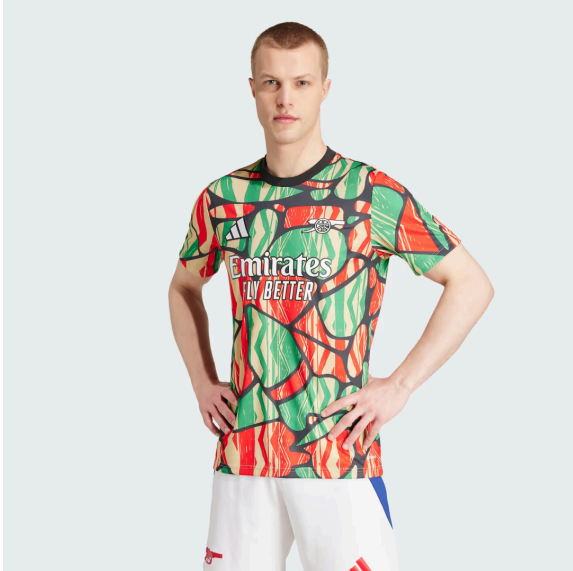
With the election looming, migrants in the Boston area are scrambling to secure their legal status, terrified of what the future could look like under a second Trump presidency. In recent campaign speeches, Trump has promised a sweeping range of hard-line immigration policies, including ending birthright citizenship and commencing a mass deportation effort to expel millions of immigrants.



A Haitian mother held her 1-month-old daughter, Stassy, as she applied for temporary protected status at the Boston Missionary Baptist Church. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

“We already saw in the previous Trump administration that many existing immigration statuses and pathways were scaled back, or attempts were made to terminate some of these programs,” said Elizabeth Sweet, the executive director of the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition.

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But there is only so much migrants here can do. They are limited by the backlog in immigration court, the shortage of lawyers to help them, and the Biden administration's own recent efforts to tighten immigration rules in an effort to staunch the flow of migrants coming into the United States. In fiscal year 2023, which ran from October 2022 through September 2023, authorities encountered roughly 2.5 million migrants at the US-Mexico border, a historic high, according to US Customs and Border Protection data.

The immigration court backlog rose from about 2.8 million pending cases at the end of fiscal 2023 to more than 3.5 million pending cases at the end of April 2024, [according to an analysis of immigration court records](#) by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, a data research organization at Syracuse University.

President Biden, under intense political pressure, [issued an executive order in June that restricted access to asylum](#) and rejected asylum claims from most individuals who entered the country without authorization.

The extent to which immigration has become a central focus of Trump's campaign was on full display at the convention, where speaker after speaker promised, to tumultuous applause, to stop what Republican Senator Ted Cruz called "a literal invasion" on the southern border.

Former acting director of ICE Tom Homan addressed migrants directly when he took the stage Wednesday night.

"I got a message to the millions of illegal aliens that Joe Biden's releasing into our country, in violation of federal law: You better start packing now," he said, as the crowd erupted. "You're damn right. Because you're going home."



Haitian children huddled together to watch a video as their father applied for temporary protected status at the Boston Missionary Baptist Church. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

[About half of those surveyed in an Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research](#) poll published in March said they wanted to reduce the number of people who

are able to seek asylum in the United States. And more than two-thirds disapproved of how Biden was dealing with immigration.

A major concern for many recent migrants, should Trump win, is whether he would seek to restrict the temporary protections the Biden administration has extended to people from Haiti and a handful of other countries experiencing extreme instability.

The [Biden administration announced earlier this summer that the administration would](#) expand temporary protected status for Haitians amid continuing violence and humanitarian challenges in the Caribbean country. That made more than 300,000 additional Haitians living here eligible for that status, which shields immigrants from deportation for a period of 18 months.

Trump previously attempted to end TPS, though the move was blocked by litigation. The GOP platform does not discuss the issue specifically, but [Project 2025, the conservative policy plan](#) embraced by many of Trump's allies, calls for repealing TPS.

“Losing those protections would mean losing that stability,” said Julia Gelatt, the associate director of the US immigration policy program at the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank. “People are in a period of great uncertainty, not knowing what’s ahead.”

Trump in his previous administration [also tried to end Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA](#), sought to terminate a range of different programs that permitted immigrants entry into the country, [and looked to limit immigration from several Muslim-majority nations](#).

In Massachusetts, legal providers said they are stretched thin as they respond to the demand for services, particularly as new arrivals — the majority Haitian nationals — have continued to ask for shelter in the state's system in recent months. From October 2022 through September 2023, the federal fiscal year, [Governor Maura Healey's](#)

[administration has logged](#) more than 11,000 recently arrived migrants, around 72 percent of whom were from Haiti.

Anne Georges, a staff attorney at Greater Boston Legal Services, an organization that provides free legal assistance, said demand for immigration legal assistance has always been high, but the group receives roughly twice as many calls as it did a few years ago.

“We’ve had to even make adjustments with our own internal structures to absorb the number of calls, and figure out how to increase capacity in the long term,” Georges said.

She was among a dozen or so lawyers, paralegals, law students, and volunteers helping Haitian migrants fill out TPS applications at a legal clinic hosted by Greater Boston Legal Services at the Boston Missionary Baptist Church in Roxbury on Tuesday. Some were Haitian immigrants who had lived in the region for years; others were newer arrivals staying in the state shelter system.

Arthur Almeda, the president and CEO of the Boston Missionary Baptist Community Center, strode through the clinic, along with Georges, switching easily between English and Haitian Creole. Almeda said he noted a somber tone among community members ahead of November. “They’re really scared about what’s going on with the election now,” he said.

Almeda is from Haiti, and settled in the Boston area in the late 1990s. Even as a US citizen, he was constantly apprehensive about his legal status during the Trump administration, often carrying his American passport with him in case he needed to to prove his citizenship.

If Trump is elected again, he said, he’ll begin taking his passport with him again: “The fear is everywhere.”

For Junior Bruce, a migrant from Haiti who arrived in Boston in early March with his wife and 4-year-old daughter, at first sleeping on the floor of Logan Airport, the election

has been a source of unease. Though Bruce is in the country under humanitarian parole, a temporary permit DHS may grant to people for humanitarian or other reasons allowing them to enter the United States, he is worried what will happen once that expires in 2026 — especially if Trump is president.

“We can’t vote, so we’re praying that things work not only for America, but for all of us,” Bruce, 33, said in English. “As we’re all living here, we can’t say we’re American — but we’re part of America, because our lives are here.”

Bruce, previously a translator and English teacher in Haiti who left his country to escape poverty and dangerous conditions, planned to seek help at the clinic in applying for TPS status for his family next week.

The possibility of deportation looms. He hopes the government sees that with legal status, he can also give back to a country he feels has already given him so much.

“I always hoped that I would make it here,” Bruce said.

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