

# A Good Experience

## Seeking Asylum in the United States

*Nsingani Mukinayi*

### BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Read the box about asylum on the next page. Share your own story (or the story of someone you know) of coming to the U.S. seeking asylum. If you have no experience with asylum, what do you think might make the process go well? What might make it difficult?
2. What does the word *persecution* mean? Try using it in several sentences.

### We Didn't Know How to Start

I came to the U.S. with my mother and five sisters from Kinshasa, Congo. We did not have documents, and we faced a lot of challenges. I discovered that the laws and procedures for immigrants are different in different states. As an undocu-

mented immigrant, I had a difficult experience in Atlanta, Georgia, but then I went to Portland, Maine, and I had a better experience.

We were seeking asylum, but we didn't know how to

start. My mother's friend referred us to the Portland Family Shelter because she stayed there too. But we are a large family of seven, and they didn't have space for us.



*Family Promise in Portland, Maine, has a vision that "every family has a home, a livelihood, and the chance to build a better future." Photo from Pexels.com.*

### Family Promise Helped with Food and Shelter

After three days in the shelter, they sent us to their partner, Family Promise. Family Promise is a private non-profit. They took care of our housing and food needs for two months. After that time, they found a permanent house in Portland for us to live in.

### General Assistance Helped with the Asylum Application

They also referred us to the General Assistance Program in Portland, which is a government program. When we went to General Assistance, they explained to us how to apply for asylum. They also gave us vouchers for food and paid the rent for a year and a half because we couldn't work yet. Without immigration documents, I couldn't

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## What is Asylum?

Asylum is a form of protection granted to individuals who can demonstrate that they are unable or unwilling to return to their country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of:

- race,
- religion,
- nationality
- membership in a particular social group,
- or political opinion.

Source: [www.rescue.org/article/it-legal-cross-us-border-look-asylum](http://www.rescue.org/article/it-legal-cross-us-border-look-asylum)

have a legal job, drive legally, or open a bank account. I was limited.

Applying for asylum was our best option to become documented. The asylum process begins when you submit the initial paperwork. Then the local immigration office will contact you to take your picture and get your fingerprints. After that, you will wait for 150 days. Then you can apply for work authorization and a Social Security number. After a few months, you will be all set to receive your documents. This is how the standard process works and how I experienced it with my family.

## Waiting for My Life to Begin

While I was waiting for my documents, I was hopeful and excited at the same time. I had food and everything I needed, but I didn't have enough money to buy clothes or shoes that I liked. I knew that sooner or later, I would have all my documents, and my life in the U.S. could really begin.

## Now I Can Help Myself

Today, now that I have my documents, I can work and drive legally, and I opened a bank account. My life is easier than in the past because I can live anywhere I like in the country. Also with legal work, I not only help myself, I also contribute to

society by paying federal and state taxes. I can pay my bills without contacting General Assistance, and I feel free to live my life.

Arriving in the United States without documents was very challenging, but I found that once I had guidance on how to apply for asylum, it was a straightforward process. Now I am able to have the opportunities that I didn't have in my home country, and I am on the right path to fulfill all my dreams.

### AFTER YOU READ:

1. The author says he had a good experience seeking asylum in Portland, Maine. What evidence does he share to back up his claim?
2. He mentions briefly that his experience in another city was "difficult." What do you infer might have happened there?
3. What are the two sources of aid he uses in Portland? (Note: one is a private non-profit, and the other is a government program. How do you think these different organizations are funded?)
4. What sources of aid are available in your community? Work with others and make a list of resources in your community that support families and provide assistance during times of transition. Share this list with others. Create and share a slideshow presentation describing what resources are available and how to access them.

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