

2025

REPORT & PLANS FOR 2026

ANNUAL REPORT

HALINA NIEĆ LEGAL AID CENTER

*A summary of activities, programs and
overview of results in 2025, plans and
goals for 2026 and beyond*





ANNUAL REPORT

2025

The Halina Nieć Legal Aid Center

Free legal aid and protection of the rights of asylum seekers and refugees in Poland

12,796

people received free legal aid

143

lawyers' visits to centers for foreigners

23

years of work for refugees and asylum seekers

Foreword

For the Halina Nieć Legal Aid Center, 2025 was one of the most difficult years in our more than twenty-year history. In April, overnight, the funding of our main, long-standing partner was frozen. We had to close some of our legal aid points, cut back our visits to reception and detention centers and part ways with some of our team. Those who stayed worked on reduced salaries for many months.

Even so, we never stopped helping. In 2025, **12,796 people** received free legal support from us, and our lawyers reached guarded and open centers for foreigners **143 times**, providing legal aid where access to a lawyer is hardest. We won cases before administrative courts, secured releases from detention, restored benefits to families, and restored access to medical treatment and pensions for older and sick people.

In 2025, we worked in an environment that increasingly restricts the right to protection. The temporary suspension of the right to apply for international protection, the buffer zone on the border with Belarus and the gradual phasing out of special measures for Ukrainian citizens made independent, professional legal aid more necessary than ever.

This year taught us how important organizational resilience is. We could not continue our mission without the partners, organizations, institutions and individuals who support us. Yet the results in this report show that our greatest strength is our team.

I thank our lawyers for their determination, our partners for their trust and swift response in a time of crisis, and the people we assist for entrusting us with their cases.

Dr Katarzyna Przybyśławska

President of the Management Board

The Halina Nieć Legal Aid Center

2025 at a Glance

We kept free legal aid available in a year of funding crisis and tightening migration policy – and achieved concrete, documented results.

12,796 people received free legal aid	11,710 refugees from Ukraine, including 2,180 via our helpline	1,086 people in the international protection procedure	143 visits to guarded and open centers
84 people in our strategic litigation program	40+ people released from detention in Q4 alone	6 position papers and comments on draft legislation	13 legal aid points in 9 cities

Key results of the year

- **Liberty and protection.** We secured the release of more than 40 people from guarded centers in the last quarter of the year alone; our clients were granted refugee status and subsidiary protection.
- **Case law that protects others.** In the cases of four children, a Voivodeship Administrative Court ruled that the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) had breached the law by withdrawing the 800+ child benefit solely on the basis of an erroneous entry in the Border Guard register. These judgments help in further, similar cases.
- **Social security for families and older people.** We restored UKR status, child benefits, care benefits, pensions and accurate disability certificates.
- **A voice in the legislative process.** We prepared 6 position papers and comments on draft legislation and intervened with the Commissioner for Human Rights and the Ombudsman for Children regarding the detention of children.
- **Continuity despite the crisis.** Thanks to our partners' swift response, we maintained both of our main assistance programs and secured funding for 2026.

Who We Are

The Halina Nieć Legal Aid Center is a public benefit organization founded in 2002 in Kraków. We protect human rights by providing free legal aid to people at risk of exclusion and discrimination – in particular asylum seekers, refugees and stateless persons.

We combine work on individual cases with human rights monitoring, advocacy and education. Our experience from thousands of cases allows us to accurately identify systemic problems and propose concrete solutions to public institutions.

How we work

Area	What we do
Legal aid	Advice, letters, appeals, complaints and representation before authorities and courts – in Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, English and other languages.
Monitoring	Regular visits to guarded centers for foreigners and open reception centers; monitoring access to the procedure, living conditions and the situation of vulnerable people.
Advocacy	Position papers and comments on draft legislation, freedom of information requests, interventions with ombudspersons, strategic litigation.
Education and information	Legal blog, community information sessions, trainings and an internship program for law students.
Coordination	Co-coordination of the Protection Sector within the humanitarian response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis; participation in working groups.

The context of 2025

We worked amid rapidly changing law and growing pressure to restrict access to protection:

- **Restriction of the right to asylum.** In March 2025, the Sejm adopted legislation allowing for a temporary and territorial suspension of the right to apply for international protection. In our view, this undermines the principle of non-refoulement and creates a serious gap in the protection system.
- **The border with Belarus.** The ban on entering the border zone remained in force, and a draft act on direct coercive measures and firearms was processed in the context of people crossing the border.
- **Refugees from Ukraine.** Successive amendments to the special act consistently shifted the burden onto refugees' self-reliance: payment of the 800+ benefit was linked to compulsory schooling, and at the end of the year an act phasing out temporary protection was prepared. Difficulties in obtaining Ukrainian passports, changes in mobilization laws and disinformation increased uncertainty and the number of urgent cases.
- **Funding crisis in the humanitarian sector.** Global cuts affected organizations across Europe – including us.

2025 in Numbers

The data show the overall scale of the Center's assistance across all programs and projects implemented in 2025.

People who received free legal aid	Number of people
People in the international protection procedure	1,086
Refugees from Ukraine assisted outside the helpline	9,530
Refugees from Ukraine assisted via the helpline (additional)	2,180
Total refugees from Ukraine	11,710
Total beneficiaries	12,796

Lawyers' visits to centers	Number of visits
Open centers for asylum seekers	65
Guarded centers for foreigners	78
Total – all lawyers' missions	143

Reach and channels of assistance	
Legal aid points operating during the year	13 points in 9 cities
Mobile team visits to places where refugees live	9 locations
Helpline in Ukrainian and Russian	working days, 9:00–15:00
Information sessions for refugees from Ukraine	11 sessions, 293 attendances
Legal blog articles	16

We register each case under the person who contacts us, although cases often concern entire families. The actual number of people who benefited from our support is therefore higher than the number of beneficiaries shown above.

Who comes to us for help

Most of the people we assist are women – at our legal aid points for refugees from Ukraine, **four out of five** people receiving advice were women. Older people form a very large group, including older women living alone who cannot navigate pension and disability procedures without support. We also assist families with children, people with disabilities and serious illnesses, survivors of violence, including gender-based violence, and unaccompanied minors.

In 2025, specialized legal aid combined with referrals to other forms of support reached **264 people with specific needs** – the highest number in the history of this line of assistance.

REF-Team: International Protection

In 2025, we assisted 1,086 people in the international protection procedure – reaching them above all where lawyers are least accessible: in guarded centers for foreigners.

Where access to a lawyer is limited

People in detention cannot look for a lawyer themselves. That is why we traveled regularly – every month – to the guarded centers in **Przemyśl, Lesznowola, Kętrzyn and Białystok** and to the open centers in **Dębak, Linin, Grupa, Białystok and Czerwony Bór**. We visited the guarded center in Przemyśl most often – more than 30 times during the year.

During our visits, we provided advice while monitoring access to the asylum procedure, living conditions and the situation of people with specific needs. We continued our assistance at our office in Kraków, by phone and by email.

Scope of assistance

- requests for release from detention and complaints against decisions on placement in a guarded center,
- preparation for interviews, evidentiary motions, appeals against negative decisions and complaints to administrative courts,
- transfers to another EU country (Dublin procedure) and selected return proceedings,
- participation in court proceedings, especially before the courts in Kraków and Przemyśl.

Documented results

Liberty and protection – Q4 2025

In the last quarter of the year alone, **more than 40 people were released from guarded centers** with the Center's support. For each of them, this meant the end of deprivation of liberty and the chance to pursue their case at liberty.

In the same period, one of our clients was granted **refugee status**, and another – **subsidiary protection**.

Strategic litigation

We enrolled **84 people** in our program of comprehensive assistance and representation by an attorney employed by the Center. We select cases that – beyond protecting the individual – allow us to challenge flawed practices of the authorities in the areas of international protection, detention and procedural safeguards.

We pay particular attention to survivors of violence and torture and to people whose health or family situation requires an individual assessment of whether continued detention is permissible at all. We also intervened regarding the detention of children (see the chapter on advocacy).

UKR-Team: Rights of Refugees from Ukraine

11,710 refugees from Ukraine received assistance from the Center. Our Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking lawyers – including people with their own experience of displacement – helped them understand changing regulations and claim their rights.

A network of assistance across Poland

During the year, we ran **13 legal aid points in 9 cities**: Kraków, Katowice, Rzeszów, Przemyśl, Sopot, Poznań, Oława, Wrocław and Rybnik. The points operated on the premises of partner organizations, institutions and local governments. Our mobile teams also reached 9 other locations, including Nowy Sącz, Przeworsk, Rabka-Zdrój, Gniezno and Bielsko-Biała – often collective accommodation centers and facilities for people with disabilities.

After the funding freeze in April, we had to close some points or reduce their activity. However, we kept our helpline in Ukrainian and Russian running (**2,180 people**) as well as email advice, which allowed us to help people living far from our points.

What refugees came to us with

- extension of temporary protection, loss and restoration of UKR status, further legalization of stay and the new residence card for former temporary protection holders,
- international protection as an alternative to temporary protection, difficulties in obtaining Ukrainian passports, the Polish travel document,
- the 800+ child benefit (including its new link to compulsory schooling), pensions, care and support benefits, disability certificates,
- temporary guardianship of children, domestic violence, education, employment, tenancy and stays in collective accommodation centers.

Benefits and families' financial security

Benefit cases made up a large part of our work. We explained the reasons for refusals and suspended payments, contacted ZUS, the Border Guard and other offices, prepared appeals and represented clients in court. We also helped digitally excluded people who could not submit electronic applications on their own.

A systemic problem: errors in the Border Guard register

In many cases, the loss of UKR status – and consequently of the 800+ benefit and access to health care – was caused by **erroneous entries in the Border Guard register**, such as recorded trips that never took place or a person mistakenly registered as a residence card holder.

We developed an effective course of action: a request to the Border Guard to correct the register, followed by a letter to ZUS. This made it possible to restore benefits at first or second instance. In the first quarter of the year alone, we restored the right to the 800+ benefit in this way in the cases of **8 children** at the administrative stage.

In the cases of **4 children**, a Voivodeship Administrative Court ruled that ZUS had breached procedural rules by linking the loss of the benefit solely to an erroneous register entry, without verifying whether the person's stay was in fact legal. These judgments create case law that other families can rely on.

We also intervened successfully in other cases: an administrative court overturned a decision refusing a mother the care benefit for her daughter with a disability; we obtained a ZUS decision granting a support benefit; a court amended a child's disability certificate to indicate the need for permanent care, opening the way for the mother to receive a benefit; and we won a case before a regional court concerning a supplementary benefit for a person unable to live independently.

Information that enables people to act on their own

We held **11 information sessions** – in collective accommodation centers, integration organizations and online – on legalization of stay, pensions and the 800+ benefit. Total attendance reached **293**; the largest session, held online on the new residence rules, gathered 79 participants. We also published legal analyses in Polish and Ukrainian, including on work during the asylum procedure, travel documents and the differences between temporary and international protection.

What Our Assistance Changed

The stories below come from cases we handled. We describe them without any data that could identify the people we assisted.

Behind each of these stories there are usually several stages of work: a consultation, gathering documents, contact with an office, a letter, and often an appeal and court proceedings. This is why continuity of assistance – and stable funding for our team – matters so much.

Status restored, life-saving surgery made possible

An older woman in need of urgent cancer treatment was mistakenly registered as a residence card holder. As a result, she lost her UKR status and access to medical care. Our lawyers had the error clarified and her status restored. She was then able to undergo the surgery she needed.

PLN 9,000 in overdue benefits for two children

A mother of two was repeatedly refused the child-raising benefit. Following our intervention, the earlier decisions were overturned and her entitlement to the 800+ benefit was granted. The family received PLN 9,000 in overdue payments – money that directly serves the children.

A disability certificate that reflects reality

An older woman with very complex health problems was certified as having a mild degree of disability. After an appeal prepared with our help, the second-instance body recognized a severe degree of disability. We also helped arrange an interpreter for the committee hearing so that she could fully describe her situation.

Guardianship of a brother in two weeks

A young woman needed to be appointed temporary guardian of her underage brother. We helped her prepare a complete application and supported her throughout the proceedings. The court issued a favorable decision within two weeks, giving her the legal basis to represent the child.

Protection for a mother and daughter

For several months, a mother and her daughter tried unsuccessfully to have their UKR status restored because they had previously held temporary protection in another EU country. After we presented legal arguments, the authority restored the status of both women.

A pension that provides security

ZUS refused an older woman the minimum pension, questioning the legality of her stay. After an appeal to the court, ZUS decided to continue the payments. In another case, we secured the minimum pension together with the annual “thirteenth pension” bonus.

Advocacy and Systemic Impact

We translate our experience from individual cases into recommendations for legislators and public institutions.

Position papers and comments on draft legislation

Month	Action
March	Position paper on the draft regulation of the Ministry of the Interior and Administration introducing a temporary ban on staying in the zone along the border with Belarus
April	Comments on the amendment to the Act on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine submitted to the Małopolska Voivodeship Office
May	Position paper on the draft act on direct coercive measures and firearms
June	Comments on the draft act amending the Act on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine submitted to the ministry
July	Position paper on the draft amendment to the Act on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine
December	Comments on the act phasing out temporary protection for Ukrainian citizens

Oversight and interventions

- **Access to public information** – requests to 7 institutions: the Ministry of the Interior and Administration, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Office for Foreigners, the Council for Refugees, the Border Guard Headquarters and its Bieszczady Division, and the Government Legislation Centre.
- **Detention of children** – notifications to the Commissioner for Human Rights and the Ombudsman for Children, and participation in preparing the position of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights.
- **Case law** – judgments obtained in benefit cases of refugees from Ukraine set a standard for how ZUS handles similar cases.

Coordination and cooperation

Throughout the year, Katarzyna Przybysławska co-coordinated the **Protection Sector** within the humanitarian response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis and regularly presented legal updates at sector meetings. We are a member of the **Working Group for Cooperation with NGOs at the Migration Team of the Ministry of the Interior and Administration**. Our lawyers took part in local coordination groups in Kraków and Rzeszów, and in a lawyers' community of practice we exchanged experience with, among others, the Rule of Law Institute Foundation, avoiding duplication of assistance.

Taking part in consultations does not in itself guarantee that our recommendations will be adopted. It does, however, ensure that the voices of the people affected by the changes reach decision-makers – supported by concrete cases and data.

Quality and Accountability

Assistance tailored to the individual

We identify the specific needs of the people who come to us and adapt the form of support to them. Multilingual advice, on-site visits and handling complex cases through to resolution help overcome language, administrative and digital barriers. Nearly half of the lawyers assisting refugees from Ukraine have experienced displacement themselves – they help us best understand the needs of the community.

Protection and safeguarding standards

- **Complaints and feedback mechanism** – available on our website and in every leaflet; ensures confidentiality and independent handling of reports.
- **Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA)** – rules binding on the entire team and covered by the complaints mechanism.
- **Training on preventing gender-based violence** – delivered to our team by IRC.
- **Referral standard** – we published a form and procedure for accepting cases referred by other organizations. In 2026, we aim to promote its use among partners.
- **Monitoring** – we systematically document activities and results, and coordinators report them to the Management Board.

Training future specialists

We ran the second edition of our student internship program under the supervision of attorney Krzysztof Tkaczuk and the Center's legal team. The students completed a series of trainings on migration law, the asylum procedure and the detention of foreigners, and then, under supervision, drafted letters, analyzed country of origin information, monitored the migration situation and traveled with us to the centers. The program is the seed of our **Legal Incubator** – our response to the shortage of migration law specialists in the sector.

Funding Crisis and Organizational Resilience

UNHCR had been our main partner since 2002. In 2023–2024, responding to growing needs, we expanded our team and network of legal aid points – largely on the basis of this partnership. The sudden freeze of funds in April 2025 threatened the very existence of the organization.

What this year taught us

The key lesson is clear: an organization that relies on one dominant source of funding is defenseless against decisions made outside it. Continuity of legal aid is particularly important because our cases take months and go through successive instances – an interruption causes real harm to clients.

Strategic directions for 2026–2028

Strategic priority	What it means in practice
Institutional resilience	Financial reserve, risk management, stronger governance and compliance.
Diversified funding	EU and national funds, private foundations, individual donations and the 1.5% tax allocation – so that no single donor determines the organization's survival.
Business relations	Pro bono and CSR partnerships, cooperation with law firms and employers of foreign workers.
Team competence and wellbeing	Professional development, supervision and burnout prevention in work with trauma survivors.
Service quality	Work standards, safeguarding, systematic collection of feedback.
Inter-organizational cooperation	Strengthening the capacity of local organizations, especially in Małopolska, and shared referral standards.
Advocacy and systemic impact	Strategic litigation, detention monitoring, recommendations based on case data.

Financial statement

Our full financial statement for 2025 is available at www.pomocprawna.org and in the government database of public benefit organization reports.

Thank You!

Our work in 2025 was possible thanks to partners who not only funded our assistance, but also responded quickly and flexibly in a time of crisis.

Strategic partner

- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Funding partners

- International Rescue Committee (IRC)
- Stefan Batory Foundation

Partners hosting our legal aid points and mobile teams

Caritas Migrant and Refugee Assistance Centers in Katowice, Poznań, Gniezno and Przemyśl; Feniks International Integration Center in Rzeszów; Przemyśl City Hall; Bezpieczna Przystań Foundation in Oława and Wrocław; Center of Help for Ukraine in Sopot; Migrant Info Point, Spilno Hub, IB Polska Foundation and Freedom Space in Kraków; Social Development Center in Oława; Women's Council in Rybnik; Jesuit Refugee Service in Nowy Sącz; Wzrastanie Foundation in Przeworsk; and other organizations, schools and centers.

Substantive cooperation

The Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, the Rule of Law Institute Foundation, the Commissioner for Human Rights, the Ombudsman for Children, Protection Sector organizations, and the local governments and public institutions we worked with on our clients' cases.

We thank the Center's team for their professionalism and perseverance in a year when the work cost more than usual. We also thank the people we assist for their trust.

Support our work

Independent legal aid needs stable funding. You can support us:

1.5% of personal income tax (Polish taxpayers) – enter KRS number **0000113676** in your tax return.

With a donation to our account: IBAN PL65 1160 2202 0000 0000 4950 8531, reference: "Donation for statutory purposes".

Through cooperation – we invite companies and law firms to pro bono partnerships and CSR programs.

Contact

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