

Anna Thompson

Lumos Final Report

From June 2023 to May 2024, I worked with the legal team at Asylum Access Thailand (AAT) to provide services and support to asylum-seekers undergoing the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process with UNHCR. In my role as a Volunteer Legal Advocate (VLA), I carried out client intake and screening interviews, advised clients on issues relating to RSD before UNHCR and complementary pathways to other countries, conducted research on country of origin (COI) conditions and refugee law jurisprudence, drafted legal briefs, and presented group workshops and legal information clinics.

AAT provided training on working with interpreters, providing psychosocial support to asylum-seekers and refugees, effects of vicarious trauma, and Thailand's National Screening Mechanism (NSM), to name a few. These provided a strong background and framework for me to effectively understand the Thai immigration/refugee law context.



My supervisors ensured that I had adequate training, and they worked with me so that I was able to gradually take on additional duties. For example, I began by shadowing legal clinics, client appointments regarding reopening, and following up with the UNHCR/flagging client cases. As I became more comfortable with the types of appointments and services that AAT provided and increased my client interaction, then I began handling on-call days, legal clinics, RSD interview preparation, pre-screenings, and eventually full screenings.

My overarching goals before I began my Lumos project were to: (1) prepare for a career in immigration law, (2) develop relationships with and provide support to refugees and asylum-seekers in Thailand, and (3) prepare for the possibility of living abroad and relocating after I graduate law school.

Working with AAT did help me to understand more of the career opportunities that are available within the refugee law field, including working with newly arrived asylum-seekers, assisting with the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process, resettlement, etc. This has reinforced my desire to work in human rights law with an emphasis on supporting immigrants, refugees, and survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, particularly through advocacy and policy.

Secondly, AAT consists of local/Thai, refugee, and international staff. I learned so much from them and their wide range of perspectives and lived experiences. I also had the opportunity to network with other local organizations and NGOs in Thailand. As the refugee law field tends to be quite interconnected worldwide, I know my coworkers and connections in Bangkok are relationships that I will continue to foster.

Refugees in Thailand are divided into two groups — camp-based and urban — with the former classification given only to people who left Myanmar. The UNHCR is responsible only for determining the statuses of urban refugees. No national legal framework exists for the protection of urban refugees, and the UNHCR status designations are not formally recognized by the Thai government. The process of being resettled in a third country can take years.

AAT legal screening exists because AAT is currently one of only two legal service providers to urban refugees in Thailand. Also, as mentioned above, even if an applicant is recognized as a refugee by UNHCR, this does not offer increased protection under Thai law. Refugees in Thailand are extremely limited in their access to work and also freedom of movement. Transnational repression, politics, and country relations also play a role in this.

I was definitely able to witness the impact that AAT has on the outcome of clients' cases with UNHCR. Examples include clients being recognized after receiving interview preparation or after AAT submitted legal briefs on their behalf. Experiences that really stood out to me are when I accompanied clients to their UNHCR interviews, including first instance RSD interviews, follow-up interviews, and appeals. Through doing so, I was able to see firsthand how UNHCR conducts these interviews and what their criteria are. Many of our interviews and appointments were conducted over the phone for the clients' safety, so the accompaniments were my first time meeting some clients in person. Especially as the RSD procedures can be so intimidating or unknown, it is important for clients to know that their legal advisor is there advocating for and representing them.

My advice for future Lumos travelers is to take the time to really research your project beforehand and over prepare as much as you can, including having a specific breakdown of your budget (e.g., I broke it down to the cost of each toiletry item I'd need and the frequency I'd need to buy those things). It's helpful to have a picture of what your life will look like in your host country as much as you can — knowing which area you'll likely live in, how you'll find housing there, and what will be included in the rent. It's also important to have a project that corresponds with your studies at Belmont and your future studies/career goals. Also, be aware of how you'll manage your mental health abroad. For me, it was so important to make connections with and

meet people early on when I moved to Bangkok. That made me feel really supported there and helped it feel more like home. For example, I spent Christmas in Bangkok celebrating with some really amazing friends watching movies, cooking food together, and exchanging gifts. Even though it was warm outside, we had the AC on so it felt more festive :) My last piece of advice is to travel around either before, during, or after your Lumos project if you're able to! I was fortunate to be able to travel around Thailand and also internationally to several countries near Thailand. I traveled some with friends, but also solo traveled for the first time, and it was a huge growth experience for me. Lumos has equipped me with a firm readiness to go into law school and continue on my path of pursuing human rights law / movement lawyering.



Thank you to Dr. Ken Spring, Shauna Walsh, and the entire Lumos committee for their guidance in helping me bring this project to life. Also, thank you to my friends and family for sticking with me through long, blurry FaceTime calls abroad and supporting me throughout this journey.