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AsylumConnect Media Kit

Media Contacts

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About AsylumConnect

Co-founded by a gay asylum seeker and trans American at the University of Pennsylvania, AsylumConnect is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization providing **the world's first web and mobile resource platform designed for LGBTQ+ people fleeing persecution**.

AsylumConnect leverages technology to instantly match LGBTQ+ people fleeing persecution (including those seeking asylum, resettled refugees, the undocumented community, other immigrants and homeless youth) with independently verified safe legal, medical, mental health and social service providers. Lawyers, case managers and other service providers also use the free platform to easily gather verified affirming service referrals for their LGBTQ+ clients.

AsylumConnect's free resource platform is available as a free website, mobile responsive web app (accessible via a web browser on a phone), and native iOS and Android mobile apps. The platform is currently available in 35 U.S. states, Canada, and Mexico.

Since launching in Seattle, Washington in 2016, the free AsylumConnect platform has made **over 100,000 matches** between LGBTQ+ people fleeing persecution and the vetted affirming service providers. (*Over 80% of matches to-date have been made in the United States. For up-to-date information, see the "Our Impact" page of our homesite.)

Why AsylumConnect Is Needed

In **80+ countries** it remains illegal or fundamentally unsafe to live openly as a LGBTQ+ person.

- Same-sex activity between consenting adults is subject to criminalization in approximately 70 countries
- Of these 70 countries, 31 carry a sentence of 10+ years in prison, and **12 countries still impose the death penalty**
- 12 countries target gender identity through 'cross-dressing' or 'impersonation' laws
  "I know that I either leave this place or die. Any information [on the LGBTQ asylum process] will be very valuable to me as I am all by myself here. I have no friends knowing about me nor any family member. ***My only source is the internet****."*

—Trans asylum seeker from the Middle East to AsylumConnect

"I am planning to move to the U.S. to live like a normal human being without fear of persecution. ***Show me the way****."*
— Gay asylum seeker from the Middle East to AsylumConnect

As a result, every year, tens of thousands are forced to flee their home countries due to persecution based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Many turn to asylum and refugee protections as a lifeline.

- The U.S. is facing an unprecedented immigration case backlog. The U.S. immigration court system currently has a backlog of over 1 million cases. An estimated 5 percent of U.S. asylum claims are based on persecution of sexual orientation or gender identity, which suggests there are over 50,000 currently pending LGBTQ cases in America.
- Additionally, thousands of LGBTQ+ people are seeking asylum in Canada, and the country's acceptance rate of asylum seekers is the highest in 27 years.

The challenge for many LGBTQ+ people fleeing persecution is that discrimination continues even in "safe" havens. Doctors, shelters, lawyers, and the wider social services sector in North America can be unsafe and biased for queer and trans people. LGBTQ+ asylum seekers especially often struggle to access legitimate local services and support, and face increased risk of immigration detention, homelessness, and facing homophobic or transphobic behavior when accessing critical social services. Out of options, many are forced to give up on their legal claim and face deportation to their dangerous home country.

AsylumConnect leverages technology to fill this critical information gap separating LGBTQ+ people fleeing persecution from the safe direct service providers that can help.

How AsylumConnect Started

AsylumConnect co-founders Sy and Jamie met as college students at the University of Pennsylvania. Sy shared his personal experience struggling to find safe resources during his own U.S. asylum process.

Despite access to technology, upon arrival in the United States Sy struggled as a gay immigrant to know where it was safe to go for help to meet his basic needs, from finding legitimate pro bono legal representation for his asylum claim to LGBTQ+ affirming health care, mental health support, housing, and educational opportunities. As a trans man from a conservative background, the feeling of not being able to live authentically deeply resonated with Jamie.

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Together, during their senior year at Penn, Sy and Jamie co-founded the tech nonprofit AsylumConnect to extend the first ever digital lifeline to other persecuted and marginalized LGBTQ+ people.

AsylumConnect is founded on the belief that ***every*** LGBTQ+ person deserves the safety and freedom to live authentically.

Impact Data & Testimonials

Since launching in 2016, AsylumConnect's free website and mobile app has made **100,000+ matches** between LGBTQ+ people fleeing persecution and vetted affirming providers.

Highlights:

- United States: 82,000+ matches
- Canada: 2,000+ matches
- Mexico: 700+ matches

Verified Service Area Coverage:
The full AsylumConnect platform is currently available in 35 U.S. states, Canada and Mexico. The free platform also includes a translated international resource page for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and refugees who are outside of North America or still in transit.

AsylumConnect's platform currently lists 1,400+ organizations and 5,000+ services vetted by trained volunteers to be welcoming to LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and other LGBTQ+ people fleeing persecution.

*Prior to inclusion on AsylumConnect, trained volunteers verify that each direct service provider is: 1) active and legitimate, 2) LGBTQ+ friendly, and 3) accessible to asylum seekers and the undocumented community. AsylumConnect's trained volunteers also re-verify each provider listed on the platform at least once every 6 months for maximum user safety and quality control. (Learn more.)

- United States: 1,000+ vetted organizations & 4,000+ vetted services
- Canada: 180+ vetted organizations & 650+ vetted services
- Mexico: 200+ vetted organizations & 600+ vetted services

The most common verified service categories listed on AsylumConnect include: Mental Health, Legal, Medical, Community Support, and Education & Employment.

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Additional Platform Features:

- **Verification (safety)**: all direct service providers listed on AsylumConnect are vetted (and re-verified at least once every 6 months) by trained volunteers to be welcoming to LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and other LGBTQ+ people fleeing persecution (learn more about our vetting process);
- **Accessible**: AsylumConnect is available as a free website and on mobile (via a mobile-responsive web app and native iOS and Android mobile apps);
- **Translation**: available in native English and over 100 additional languages on-demand via Google Translate (*the AsylumConnect team is in the process of adding native Spanish translations to the platform for the US and Mexico)
- **Anonymity**: designed to protect users' confidentiality and privacy online
- **Search filters**: users can easily filter out services that require specific documentation (such as medical insurance, proof of age/income/residence, or a referral) to access
- **Public ratings and reviews**: once logged-in, users can share public ratings (one to five stars) and written reviews on all resources
- **Save and share resources**: once logged-in, users can also save and share their personalized resource list(s) via print, email or another AsylumConnect user account
- **Public resource submissions**: once logged-in, users can "suggest" new direct service providers in the US, Canada or Mexico that they think might be a fit for our platform via country-specific "Suggest New Resource" forms
- **Ownership over their own listing (service providers)**: service providers who register for a free user account can also "claim" their organization's live profile page to help keep their organization's information up-to-date, 24/7

Featured User Story:

We routinely hear success stories at AsylumConnect of how our technology has impacted real people.

For example, a transgender asylum seeker in the Washington, D.C. area who leveraged AsylumConnect's free confidential resource app to connect with much-needed legal, mental health and local community support during their asylum process.

***They remain safely in the U.S. today**.*

***When AsylumConnect reaches scale, we can ensure millions more LGBTQ+ people fleeing persecution are successful in rebuilding their new lives**.*

Sample User Testimonials

*"Thank you so much. I was trying to gather information such as yours, but **this is the most comprehensive I have ever read**." — LGBTQ+ asylum seeker*

*"It's wonderful to see AsylumConnect continue to thrive. I will be **needing it now more than ever**. A huge thanks to [AsylumConnect] for all the work and advocacy you are doing for us; especially a time like this." — LGBTQ+ asylum seeker*

*"If AsylumConnect had existed when I was applying for asylum it would have made my life much easier. AsylumConnect's **work truly saves lives**. I was homeless for about three years because I could not find services for undocumented lesbians, work, or anyone who could explain to me how the immigration process work[ed] and what my options were." — LGBTQ+ asylee*

*"My office is glad to learn that AsylumConnect exists. **So many asylum-seekers don't know where to turn & worry that 'help' will discriminate**." — Asylum attorney focused on LGBT/SOGI claims*

*"I'm so excited about AsylumConnect's work. **It's exactly what's needed**. We have people getting on trains to reach us when we can't help more people or people who need help in other parts of the country, we can use AsylumConnect Catalog to tell them where it is safe to go." — Nonprofit user*

*"The AsylumConnect Catalog is **easy to use, and has a lot of helpful information** for asylum seekers in one place." — Nonprofit user*

*"A few years ago, through one of my tasks at Immigration Equality, I worked on improving our hotline and referral process, and I came across the AsylumConnect website. I started using the website as a way to find resources for individuals so **I recognize the importance of the existence of this type of database and centralized information, and I can attest to its efficacy by the many individuals who benefitted from the information obtained**." — Asylum paralegal at legal nonprofit*

*"I am an international student here in the US. My family have cut me off completely because I got engaged to my now Fiancé. My VISA only allows me to work on campus. My campus is now closed due to COVID-19 and because of that my only source of income is non-existent. I have no money and no family support here to help me financially. **So I am stuck**." — LGBTQ+ international college student impacted by COVID-19*

*"I'm a black gay asylum seeker that is about to be homeless and without any resources. **I don't have a work permit to work so with these COVID-19 crisis hard times I can't survive with no job**." — Gay asylum seeker in need of safe resources during COVID-19*

*"I'm in [the] process of asylum. I have court in less than two weeks. I'm afraid to get back to my country and I need to find here a job to exist. **Any advice or help will be [a] blessing**." — LGBTQ+ asylum seeker in New York in need of safe resources*

*" I am looking for support [with the] asylum [process]. I am colombian and I have been in the States for almost two months … however I don`t know how the process is, **where can I find some help, a lawyer specialized in LGBTQ and so on...Could you give me some orientation?**" — LGBTQ+ asylum seeker in Miami in need of safe resources*

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Jamie Sgarro, AsylumConnect Co-Founder, inaugural Executive Director & Board Member

Jamie Sgarro (he/him or they/them) is the co-founder of AsylumConnect and a member of the governing board. He previously served as the organization's inaugural executive director from 2014 to May 2021. As a trans man who grew up in a conservative environment, Jamie remains personally motivated to ensure every persecuted trans and queer person has access to AsylumConnect's vital service. He is currently attending law school with the hope of becoming a civil rights attorney focused on issues impacting LGBTQ+ people, particularly the transgender community.

Under Jamie's leadership, AsylumConnect built a diverse coalition of staff, volunteers, interns, board members, advisors, and established key partnerships to scale its free web and mobile resource platform to reach thousands of LGBTQ+ people in need across North America. After co-founding the organization in 2014, Sgarro raised its first $500,000 in funding, launched a junior board program for young professionals, secured national news coverage, and earned international recognition for outstanding contribution in social impact as the recipient of the Millennium Campus Network's 2015 Millennium Peace Prize at the United Nations, member of the Clinton Foundation's 2017 CGI U Alumni Honor Roll of social innovators, 2019 Roddenberry Fellow, 2020 Forbes 30 under 30 honoree in Law & Policy, finalist in Fast Company's 2020 World Changing Ideas Awards, and Gold Winner of the 2021 Passion Fund by Linktree and Square.

Jamie has been a featured speaker on LGBTQ+ rights and technology for social good, and his work has appeared in national outlets including The HuffPost, Forbes, Teen Vogue, The Clinton Foundation's "Why Am I Telling You This?" Podcast, The Advocate, The Hill, NowThis, and NBC OUT.

Jamie holds a B.A. cum laude with distinction in Health & Societies from the University of Pennsylvania and a M.S. in Management from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

More about Sgarro can be found at his personal website www.jamiesgarro.com and he can be followed on Twitter @jamiesgarro.

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Shalawn L James, AsylumConnect Executive Director (May 2021 – Present)

A native of Annapolis Maryland, Shalawn L James, is a mental health educator, advocate and policy influencer who focuses her work around increasing visibility, equity and access for underserved and marginalized communities. Her two-decade long career has been spent counseling survivors of domestic violence, working with children and adolescents at Milton Hershey School, providing counseling services to abused and neglected children and their families and advocating and policy reform for the LGBTQI+ community, mentally ill, BIPOC community and justice reform.

Shalawn has spent the last several years in leadership of the statewide Mental Health Association (MHA) for Pennsylvania where she worked directly with State leaders to transform the care, treatments and access to mental health services on both a local and statewide level for BIPOC and LGBTQI+ communities. She serves as a member of many boards including but not limited to the Governor's Appointee (newly appointed to her 2nd Commission) on the Medical Marijuana Advisory Board as a Patient Advocate and the Mental Health Planning Committee, Children's Committee. Shalawn has been the keynote speaker and presenter for Comcast, Keller Williams, South Central Sickle Cell Council, Pennsylvania State University and many more, on a wide range of mental health, and Diversity, Inclusion & Equity topics.

Shalawn's formal education includes degrees from Delaware State University, York College of Pennsylvania and Eastern University. She is currently pursuing a dual Masters/Doctorate in I/O Psychology from Purdue University with the hopes of furthering her impact for change within her local community and nationwide.

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Hans How, AsylumConnect Board Member & Previous Volunteer Vice President
As a LGBTQ+ asylee himself, Hans How knows first-hand how difficult it is to find safe help in a new country. He is a frequent speaker on LGBTQ+ rights, and his work with AsylumConnect has been featured in *The Daily Beast*, *The Bay Area Reporter*, and others.

As a gay Asian immigrant community leader, Hans co-founded and campaigned for the historic passage of Proposition C: Commissions For All, a ballot measure that will give all San Franciscans, regardless of immigration status, a voice, representation, and equal rights to serve on city commissions and advisory bodies. After Prop C was successfully passed by voters, Hans was appointed by the Board of Supervisors to serve as the Housing Commissioner to provide oversight of city funds to develop permanently affordable housing in the City and County of San Francisco.

Born and raised in Malaysia, Hans is a proud first-generation college graduate from Wesleyan University, where he earned full scholarships from the Freeman Foundation and the American Malaysian Chamber of Commerce.

Before joining the AsylumConnect Board of Directors, Hans previously served as the volunteer Vice President of AsylumConnect from June 2017 – May 2021.

How is based in San Francisco, California and can be followed on Twitter at @HansHow00.

Other Spokespersons

AsylumConnect has a robust Advisory Council, which includes LGBTQ+ asylees and refugees from countries including Mexico, Russia, Egypt, and Nigeria. There are times upon request where members of the Advisory Council will be available to speak to press.

More about the current members of AsylumConnect's Advisory Council is available: https://asylumconnect.org/about-us

AsylumConnect Supporters

In addition to a range of individual supporters across the nation, AsylumConnect has been fortunate to receive financial and in-kind support from the Roddenberry Foundation, Clinton Foundation, Urban Justice Center Social Justice Accelerator, Brooklyn Community Foundation, Calamus Foundation, Broadway CARES/Equity Fights AIDS, Clif Bar Family Foundation, J.M. Kaplan Fund, NYC Pride, Stonewall Community Foundation, the Funding Queerly Giving Circle at Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, Borealis Philanthropy's Collective Fund for Trans Communities, and others.

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Featured Press

June 2021 Los Angeles Blade
It's time to prioritize the plight of trans and queer refugees (Op-ed)
https://www.losangelesblade.com/2021/06/18/its-time-to-prioritize-the-plight-of-trans-and-queer-refugees

April 2021 Greatist
Millennial Change Makers
https://greatist.com/live/millennial-change-makers

March 2021 Authority Magazine
Young Change Makers: Why and How Jamie Sgarro of AsylumConnect Is Helping To Change Our World
https://medium.com/authority-magazine/young-change-makers-why-and-how-jamie-sgarro-of-asylumconnect-is-helping-to-change-our-world-6a6206c51b79

December 2020 The Daily Beast
Biden Wants to Fix Trump's Trans Detention Policy. Advocates Say He Needs to End It.
https://www.thedailybeast.com/biden-wants-to-fix-trumps-trans-detention-policy-advocates-say-he-needs-to-end-it

August 2020 NBC OUT
Trump proposals threaten LGBTQ asylum-seekers' hopes of refuge in U.S.
https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/trump-proposals-threaten-lgbtq-asylum-seekers-hopes-refuge-u-s-n1236736

July 2020 The American Prospect
The Public Comment Battle to Save American Asylum
https://prospect.org/justice/the-public-comment-battle-to-save-american-asylum

July 2020 Forbes.com
Trump's New Asylum Regulations Could Have Devastating Effects For LGBTQ People. The Leaders Of AsylumConnect Explain Why.
https://www.forbes.com/sites/mollysprayregen/2020/07/12/trumps-new-asylum-regulations-could-have-devastating-effects-for-lgbtq-people-the-leaders-of-asylumconnect-explain-why/#367fef0b6858

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June 2020 Between The Lines
AsylumConnect Helps LGBTQ Refugees Find Support Across U.S., Co-Hosts June 20 Virtual Pride
https://pridesource.com/article/asylum-connect-helps-lgbtq-refugees-find-support-across-u-s-co-hosts-june-20-virtual-pride/

June 2020 The Hill
This World Refugee Day and Pride month we need to save LGBTQ asylum (Op-ed)
https://thehill.com/opinion/immigration/503580-this-world-refugee-day-and-pride-month-we-need-to-save-lgbtq-asylum

May 2020 Oprah Magazine
Here's How You Can Celebrate Pride Virtually
https://www.oprahmag.com/life/a32700263/virtual-pride-events-2020

April 2020 Fast Company
World Changing Ideas Awards 2020: Apps Finalists and Honorable Mentions
www.fastcompany.com/90492187/world-changing-ideas-awards-2020-apps-finalists-and-honorable-mentions

December 2019 Forbes
Forbes 30 Under 30, Class of 2020 (Law & Policy List)
www.forbes.com/30-under-30/2020/law-policy

November 2019 GO Magazine
This New App For LGBTQ Asylum Seekers Is A Game-Changer
http://gomag.com/article/this-new-app-for-lgbtq-asylum-seekers-is-a-game-changer

September 2019 Teen Vogue
LGBTQ Asylum Seekers Face Layered Marginalization, So These Four Organizations Are Here to Help
www.teenvogue.com/story/lgbtq-asylum-seekers-marginalization-four-organizations-help-resource-guide

August 2019 Forbes.com
Jamie Sgarro's AsylumConnect Helps LGBTQ Asylum Seekers Access Safe Services
www.forbes.com/sites/mollysprayregen/2019/08/14/katie-sgarros-asylumconnect-helps-lgbtq-asylum-seekers-access-safe-services/#5db85d25ff84

https://asylumconnect.org

June 2019 Clinton Foundation's "Why Am I Telling You This?" Podcast
Stonewall 50: Pride, Progress, and the Future Fight for LGBTQ+ Rights Episode (Podcast)
https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/stonewall-50-pride-progress-future-fight-for-lgbtq/id1462232601?i=1000442930121

June 2019 NowThis
AsylumConnect Helps LGBTQ+ Asylum Seekers Find Resources in the U.S. (Video)
https://nowthisnews.com/videos/news/asylumconnect-helps-lgbtq-asylum-seekers-find-resources-in-the-us

May 2019 The Bay Area Reporter
LGBTs Visit US-Mexico Border, Meet Asylum Seekers
www.ebar.com/news/news/275665/lgbts_visit_us-mexico_border,_meet_asylum_seekers

March 2019 Urban Justice Center (UJC) Social Justice Accelerator Announcement
https://accelerator.urbanjustice.org/project-announcements

January 2019 The Advocate
LGBTQ Asylum Seekers Cannot Wait Safely in Mexico (Op-ed)
www.advocate.com/commentary/2019/1/04/lgbtq-asylum-seekers-cannot-wait-safely-mexico

January 2019 Roddenberry Foundation Fellows List
https://roddenberryfoundation.org/our-work/roddenberry-fellowship/fellowship-in-action/2019-fellows

August 2018 The Daily Beast
The Malaysian Gay Man Fighting for His Life, and Many Other LGBT Asylum Seekers
www.thedailybeast.com/the-malaysian-gay-man-fighting-for-his-life-and-many-other-lgbt-asylum-seekers

July 2018 The Advocate
Trump Policies Will Send LGBT Asylum Seekers to Their Deaths (Op-ed)
www.advocate.com/commentary/2018/7/09/trump-policies-will-send-lgbt-asylum-seekers-their-deaths

December 2017 The Clinton Foundation
The Honor Roll: A young leader provides a lifeline for LGBTQ asylum seekers in the U.S.
https://stories.clintonfoundation.org/the-honor-roll-a-young-leader-provides-a-lifeline-for-lgbtq-asylum-seekers-in-the-u-s-59b1de680539

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