

THE ADVOCATE (/COMMUNITY/ALUMNI/THE-ADVOCATE/)

One Week in April

Five AUWCL Students in the Immigrant Justice Clinic Travel to Dilley, Texas to Provide Legal Counsel to Women and Children Seeking Asylum

In April 2019 Associate Dean Jayesh Rathod (<https://www.wcl.american.edu/community/faculty/profile/rathod/bio>), immigration attorney Meg Hobbins '07, and a team of five American University Washington College of Law Immigrant Justice Clinic (<https://www.wcl.american.edu/academics/experientialedu/clinical/theclinics/ijc/>) students traveled to Dilley, Texas, a remote area about 75 miles outside of San Antonio and three hours from the Texas/Mexico border. Their purpose in Dilley? To provide legal counsel to women and children seeking asylum who were detained at the South Texas Family Residential Center.

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The Dilley facility, which opened in 2014, is one of three active family detention centers in the United States. The vast majority of the detainees at these centers are seeking asylum, having fled their countries of origin because of various forms of persecution and hardship. Many detainees are facing expedited removal proceedings and therefore rely heavily on the support of volunteer lawyers and law students, who assist them in navigating complex legal processes.

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We asked the group to share their experiences from their week in Dilley, volunteering with the CARA Pro Bono Project.

MONDAY, APRIL 1

Kara Kozikowski '19

When you drive up to the South Texas Family Residential Center (or Dilley, as everyone refers to it), you immediately know that you are heading into a giant federal detention complex. Its gates are sprawling, the vast parking lot is crowded, and all you can see initially are rows of floodlights and trailers. Once our group of seven arrived inside the visitor check-in center, gallons of water in tow, we were immediately sent to the legal services trailer, the only other place on the premises that it sounds like we'll see during our visit here.

My first impression of the legal services trailer was that it was colorful. This includes everything from the children's art on the walls, to the bright red chairs, to the women themselves, who were dressed in an assortment of sweatsuits in colors ranging from navy blue to neon pink and green. I walked into Dilley fully expecting it to look like the adult detention centers where I've visited clients previously, but as we toured the legal services trailer, which included a room for children to sit and watch TV while their mothers consulted with attorneys, it became clear that Dilley was closer to an internment camp than a detention center.

Meg Hobbins '07, Senior Attorney, Grossman, Young & Hammond

We had our legal training this morning with the Dilley Pro Bono Project staff and then went to the jail to start our legal work. It felt very different from when I volunteered in January, when we were under pressure to get hundreds of mothers prepared for their impending credible fear interviews (CFIs). Our goal then was to meet with mothers, explain the interview process, listen to what they had experienced, and help distill a case theory that would hopefully move them toward a positive decision. I barely thought about the next steps for them in the asylum process because I was so focused on helping them navigate the CFI.

Today, there were fewer women to meet with, and they all had received their immigration court charging documents. None had to go through the CFI process. Instead of prepping them for interviews, we provided consultations to help them prepare for the asylum process on the outside. It felt jolting to re-focus on the harsh reality of how difficult it

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would be to find good representation upon release. The chance of finding pro bono assistance is low, and the possibility of being scammed by an unlicensed or unethical attorney was pretty high. Are we really meeting our obligations to asylum seekers when we have an incredibly complex legal process and no guaranteed assistance with competent representation?

TUESDAY, APRIL 2

Matthew Reiter '19

It has been extremely jarring attempting to acclimate to the controlled chaos of the South Texas Family Residential Center. The volunteers who work with mothers and children here attempt to introduce structure within the trailer where we are stationed, but it is a thin veneer of normalcy.

It feels like a conveyer belt within the trailer itself. Some neon-dressed women are gathered around for a discussion on Credible Fear Interviews, while other women are circled around for discussions about their release. All the while, their young children are latched to their arms or legs or laps, or sit inside a room where the Cartoon Network plays on an endless loop. We as volunteers are not allowed to touch the mothers and children other than giving a handshake when we meet them and when we say goodbye. That, for me, is particularly difficult. We are forbidden from having truly human interactions—and reactions—to women who almost always have extremely traumatic stories to share. The extent of our freedom to empathize is to hand them tissues or share reassuring words.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 3

Meg Hobbins '07, Senior Attorney, Grossman, Young & Hammond

The managing attorney of the Dilley Pro Bono Project set up some alternative tasks for us to tackle today. I accompanied the students to the San Antonio bus station, where we liaised with RAICES, a non-profit organization. There, one of their staff gave us a quick orientation to the work they do. Busloads of Central American families arrive from McAllen, Eagle Pass, and other locations after being detained in the hieleras and perreras (ice boxes and dog cages) and dumped on the street with nothing. We provided very brief consults to the parents, or at least to the ones that were interested in talking to us. Understandably, some of the parents were very skeptical of who we were, especially after having been treated horribly by Customs and Border Patrol.

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It was a day of seeing traumatized and disoriented families taking a step further away from where they had been arrested, detained, and mistreated, toward a new phase. It was heartening to see volunteers carefully checking everyone's bus tickets and walking exhausted parents through their long and confusing cross-country Greyhound itineraries. The kids seemed excited to get a backpack from the volunteers, filled with food, toiletries, a stuffed animal, and a small toy car. With all the good we saw, there was a lot of bad. We heard about migrant families being scammed, and a sexual assault of a 4-year-old girl a week earlier at the station. One thing was clear: These families were at the mercy of everyone they encountered.

Pamela Duran '20

At the Greyhound station in San Antonio I was able to fully grasp and witness the long journey that these people had ahead of them. Migrants were being dropped off sometimes without any information or bus tickets to be able to reach their sponsors. Others had nothing but the bus tickets in their hands.

Hearing a woman at the end of our shift calling for me and asking me if I could give her my shoes and any women's hygiene products really touched my heart. It made me grateful that the city had something in place to be able to give these migrants what they needed, which are basic fundamental items human beings deserve to have.

The immigrant population is also vulnerable and unfortunately, people can take advantage of their suffering and helplessness.

THURSDAY, MARCH 4

Professor Jayesh Rathod, Associate Dean for Experiential Education and Director of Clinical Programs

Today, we continued with our work with the women and children at the facility. Increasingly, the Department of Homeland Security is issuing women Notices to Appear (NTAs) in immigration court, without having to go through the credible fear process. In theory, this is "good news" for the women, as it eliminates one of the steps. But there is confusion and uncertainty about why this is happening.

During the know-your-rights presentations, we are providing information to the women about finding representation once they make their way to different parts of the United States where they will reunite with friends or family members—places as diverse as

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California, Arkansas, Louisiana, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

Today, I spoke with a woman who was very concerned about the well-being and whereabouts of her cousin, a minor who had entered the country with her. Immigration officials separated the two because the minor was not with his parents. She was afraid that he would be mistreated or lost in the system—a reasonable fear, given stories about family separation. Together, we called a hotline set up by the Office of Refugee Resettlement and were able to confirm that her cousin was in government custody at a shelter in another state. She was extremely relieved to hear this news.

FRIDAY, MARCH 5

Pamela Duran '20

The last day in Dilley was a bittersweet experience. I started recognizing faces and getting familiar with some of the detained mothers and children. I wish I could keep helping them and continue working with them, but I can only hope that the work I did or the information I gave them will help them in some shape or form.

I think that the services that CARA gives are invaluable but also showed me that there is a lack of resources for services outside the detention center. Many of these detainees will have an uphill battle to find adequate legal representation or even navigating their ICE check-ins or dates at the Immigration Court. I have the utmost respect for CARA's staff and the work

they do. Even though it might seem like a drop in the ocean, that drop is fundamental and vital and makes a difference in a system that dehumanizes people who are simply looking for a better future for their children.

Matthew Reiter '19

For me, the most challenging and emotionally wrecking part of my time in Dilley has been speaking with mothers who clearly experienced unimaginable pain and trauma, who have gone through an incredible journey just to reach the United States border, yet cannot fit themselves neatly into the requirements of asylum law. They could ultimately find themselves forced to return to the countries they fled. Some of the women actually understand that themselves; on more than one occasion a mother looked at me and said, "This is not a strong claim, right?" How do we tell these mothers that it is very possible

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that everything they've been through, everything they are still going through just to feel safe and protect their children, might not be enough? So we respond as honestly as we can, and we emphasize the necessity of finding a good attorney once released, one who can work through additional facts and possibilities.

After all the threats and pain endured, these mothers deserve to feel hopeful that things might somehow work out.

SATURDAY, MARCH 6 – CLOSING THOUGHTS

Ashwini Jaisingh '19

While it was difficult to take in many of the experiences of the women we heard and imagine their challenges ahead, I was grateful we had the opportunity to volunteer in Dilley and found the trip to be a tremendous learning experience. The women we spoke with traveling to the DC Metro area and other areas around the country will be better equipped to navigate their cases. For many of the women we met with, they shared that even the opportunity to tell someone what had happened to them and why they left their home countries was cathartic for them—we were often the first people they shared their stories with upon arriving. Even though we had short interactions with many of the women we met, I hope that our legal orientation and conversations with them provided a more humane experience within a dehumanizing immigration legal system.

Seeing what asylum seekers are facing and conditions at the border helps us better understand what our clients might have gone through before they come to speak to us. It made me think about the work of the Immigrant Justice Clinic and the network of organizations that serve the immigrant community in the DC area, and how we can play a role in improving the experience of newly arrived migrants. Our time in Texas will certainly stay with me for a long time, and I hope to bring our experiences there into my future practice and immigrants' rights advocacy efforts.

If you would like to make a donation to support the important work of the Immigrant Justice Clinic, please visit alumniassociation.american.edu/IJC.