



What two Chicago lawyers learned at a Texas detention center

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A few weeks ago, we were privileged to be among a group of lawyers and other professionals who descended on Dilley, Texas, a sleepy town an hour south of San Antonio. We spent a week volunteering at the South Texas Family Residential Center, a holding facility for women and children who have come to the United States seeking asylum from the violence and instability that have plagued Central America for too long.

The project was coordinated through the CARA Pro Bono Project, an organization providing free legal counsel to these women and their children. We counseled and represented these families in what are known as "credible fear interviews" before asylum officers—the first step in settling them in the United States. Keep in mind, this isn't the typical kind of law we practice: We're transactional lawyers, but we share an interest and commitment to representing the rights of immigrants and refugees. Our firm leadership also encourages, and even requires, its lawyers to provide pro bono work to assist those who would otherwise have limited access to the justice system.

Coincidentally, while we were in Dilley, President Trump issued executive orders inspired, as he said, by his campaign promise to protect Americans from security breaches and terrorist activities. The orders suspended entry into the United States by nationals from seven countries, called for the construction of a border wall and mandated the deportation of undocumented immigrants in "sanctuary cities."

We remember the next day scanning the room in the holding facility where our clients held their children dear and waited their turns to be interviewed. How were we to advise this needy group of people in light of these developments? Perhaps the most sanguine advice we could offer was, "I don't know what lies ahead, but we are on your side, and we want to help you tell your story."

The facility in Dilley consists of several dozen trailers. The center can house up to 2,400 women and children waiting for their initial credible fear interview. Volunteers are not allowed passage to any part of the facility without being accompanied by a guard. The women wait patiently for hours to speak with an attorney to prepare their cases, all the while clutching their children close to their chests.

Depending on which side you're on, you can debate the Trump administration's express justification for issuing this executive order on the basis of concerns for national security. But for those who believe that refugees and asylum-seekers are menaces, or sources of trouble for the United States, it's important to stress that our experience in Dilley was just the opposite. The women we met were resourceful, courageous, kind and humane. They wanted the same things we all want: a safe environment for their children and the opportunity to contribute to the society in which they seek safe haven.

During the course of the week, we watched women who arrived at the center as strangers help and care for each other as if they were kin. Those who had been in detention for a few days answered questions from the new arrivals. They helped one another fill out forms and find important information in their packets of documents.

Our observations are reinforced by any number of objective facts. Refugees and asylum-seekers are not inherently dangerous. A 2016 study by the CATO Institute suggests that the odds of being killed by a foreign-born asylum recipient is 1 in 2.73 billion. The odds of being killed by a refugee are 1 in 3.64 billion. Indeed, one is more than 12 times more likely to win the PowerBall than to be killed by a refugee in a terrorist attack.

The truth is that asylum-seekers and immigrants often contribute more money to the social welfare system than they take out of it. The truth is that these women have fled unspeakable violence and left behind everything they have known to provide safety for their families. The truth is that their hope of being an American is as genuine a thing as we have ever seen.

What's in store for these women—and for us? These days, it's hard to hazard a guess. What we do know, and what regularly struck us during our time at Dilley, is that these women and their families will help knit, not rip, the fabric of America.