

Winston Provides Pro Bono Assistance to Immigrant Families at the Texas Border

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Several Winston attorneys have traveled to Port Isabel Detention Center in Southern Texas this summer to volunteer their time assisting immigrant families, many of which were separated from their children under the “zero tolerance policy.”

Pro Bono Counsel Maria Kutnick, who coordinated the firm’s involvement, Nareeneh Sohbatian, the firm’s Immigration Pro Bono Supervisory Attorney, Jennifer Miller, and Lindsay Shake each spent one week at the border working with the South Texas Pro Bono Asylum Representation Project (ProBAR), Kids in Need of Defense (KIND), and other attorneys from across the country to provide pro bono intake assistance, prepare clients for their asylum interviews, and help reunite families.

Nareeneh and Lindsay traveled to the Detention Center the week of July 9-13. “It was a time of chaos and confusion as the court-ordered reunification deadline was approaching,” Lindsay described. “Many detainees did not know where their children were being held, were facing imminent deportation, yet were being told they would be reunited with their children by July 26.” Our attorneys’ primary focus was to prepare detainees for their immigration proceedings, stay deportation proceedings pending reunification, and provide as many resources as possible to reconnect them with their children.

For those who had already received a negative credible fear interview, our attorneys were filing pro se motions for a credible fear review by an immigration judge and requests for re-interview on the grounds of emotional distress.

During the week of July 30-August 3, Maria and Jennifer met primarily with fathers who had been separated from their children. “Their stories of how they arrived at Port Isabel were all different—but they were all still separated and trying to get answers as to when they would be reunited again with their children,” Jennifer said. In addition to taking down detainees’ stories, our attorneys provided information on due process and available rights and helped navigate any potential avenues for staying in the United States. Most importantly, we helped them contact their loved ones and their children—some of whom they hadn’t spoken to in months. At the end of the week, we were able to help one father reunite with his son in Mississippi, where someone he knew was letting him stay until his deportation. Jennifer called that experience “super rewarding.”

Amanda met with 10-15 detainees during her week of volunteering, explaining the asylum process and gathering information about how they entered the United States, their children they were separated from, and why they were

afraid to return to their home country. “It was important to prepare as much as possible in the first meeting because if they were moved they may not have another opportunity to speak with a lawyer before going before an asylum official,” she explained. Nearly every detainee she met with had been threatened with death by someone in their home country—and had a claim that should have allowed them to pass the initial credible fear interview and be released pending their full asylum case. But for many immigrants without a lawyer to advise them on the process, such strong claims are regularly being denied. “I’m extremely grateful for the opportunity I had to go to the border,” Amanda said. “Being a lawyer provides crucial access to the detention center, and the ability to speak Spanish is essential to communicate with the detainees. Because of these requirements, there are a limited number of people who can assist, and so the work Winston has sponsored is incredibly valuable.”

“This is a challenging time for individuals who are trying to navigate the asylum process, not only due to the mass separation of parents and children but also due to significant shifts in immigration policies and case decisions,” Nareeneh, who oversees and provides guidance on the firm’s pro bono immigration cases, explained. “It was extremely rewarding to be able to make a direct, positive impact during this time.”

Winston is committed to providing pro bono legal counsel to those in our communities who struggle daily to meet challenges they are ill-equipped to handle, assisting nearly 1,000 pro bono clients in more than 50 substantive service areas during 2017. Visit our [Pro Bono](#) page for more details.

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Nareeneh Sohbati

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