
Help for asylum seekers

BY ERICA PEARSON

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Carmen Stellar (l.), Alejandro Lopez and Krista Dubin lead a student-run clinic at Weill Cornell Medical College which does free examinations for immigrants who have suffered physical or psychological abuse in their homelands. (DAVID HANDSCHUH/NEW YORK DAILY NEWS)

Medical students at Weill Cornell Medical College are getting training and helping immigrant asylum seekers at the same time — after starting the country’s first student-run asylum clinic at a medical school.

“I decided that this was what I wanted to dedicate my time in medical school to, apart from studying,” said Alejandro Lopez, 24, a third-year medical and Ph.D. student who is executive director for the clinic, called the Weill Cornell Center for Human Rights.

The students, along with professors who work as the clinic’s medical directors, partnered with the nonprofit Physicians for Human Rights in 2010 to create the program. Now other schools, including the University of Michigan and Brown University, are starting similar clinics modeled after Weill Cornell on the East Side.

They conduct pro-bono forensic medical evaluations for those who are seeking asylum after suffering persecution or torture. Physicians for Human Rights and other nonprofits as well as local law schools refer clients with strong cases who are in need of a medical evaluation.

Usually, a professor leads the evaluation, while the student takes notes, asks follow-up questions and compiles a legal affidavit. They hold most of their evaluations — about 60 per year — in borrowed exam rooms inside the school's clinical skills center. The group is hoping to boost their caseload.

One of the first evaluations that Lopez participated in took place at a New Jersey immigration detention center. For the psychological evaluation, he and a professor spoke for three hours in a tiny room with a gay man who fled Nigeria and was being held by Immigration and Customs Enforcement after getting caught with false documents at JFK Airport.

"He was persecuted because he was caught with his partner at a dinner. And basically government officials persecuted him, and even killed his mother," said Lopez.

During the evaluation, Lopez and the professor leading the interview drew out information about the man's psychiatric trauma. "He received asylum. So that's extremely satisfying," Lopez said. "You feel like you actually did something to impact someone's life."

To secure asylum, an immigrant must generally apply within one year of arriving in the U.S. and show they suffered persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.

An evaluation from a doctor can be either physical or psychological, depending on the immigrant's past — some clients have physical scars from torture, domestic violence or female genital mutilation, while others describe psychological suffering after being persecuted.

During the evaluation, the student and professor are looking for consistent and corroborating evidence of the persecution the immigrant says they suffered in their homeland.

"This is not a doctor-patient relationship," explains Dr. Joanne Ahola, a psychiatrist, Weill Cornell professor and a medical director at the center. Instead, it's a forensic process that uses medical skills, she said.

The most frequent diagnoses made by clinic doctors and students are post-traumatic stress disorder and major depression, according to Ahola.

As of March 6, the student clinic has conducted 131 evaluations for 117 asylum seekers from 40 countries. So far, 34 of the clients have been granted asylum or another form of legal protection — the rest are awaiting a decision or haven't been to court, Lopez said. One hundred percent of the clinic's clients who have been to court have been granted asylum.

"Having a medical affidavit as part of their case triples the likelihood of their being granted asylum," said Carmen Stellar, 25, a second-year medical student who is the clinic's director of organizational operations.

Stellar joined the clinic largely because she wants to be as compassionate a doctor as possible, she said.

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