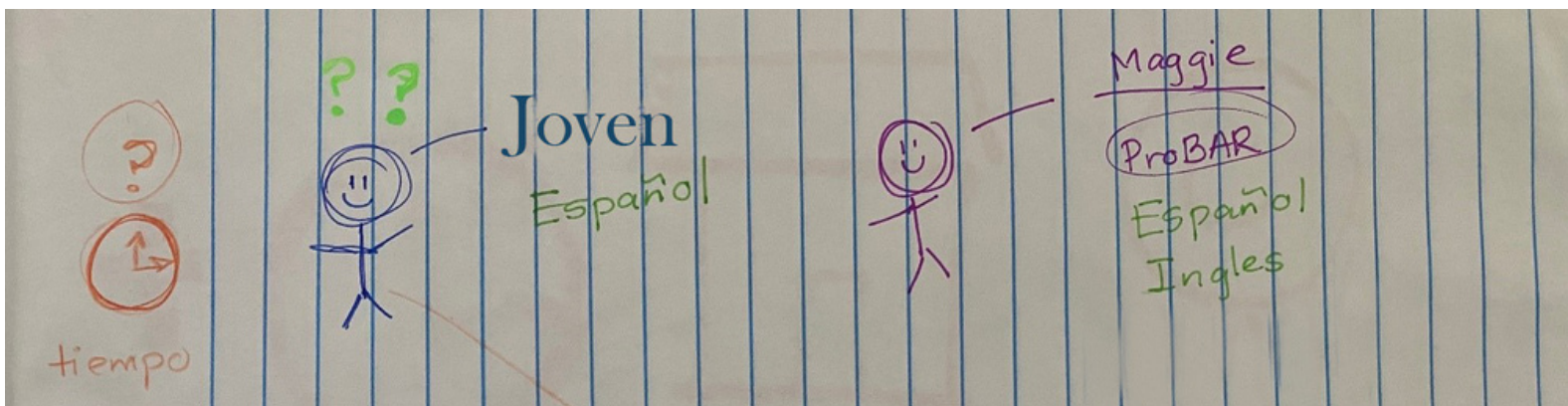


ADVOCATING FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

ProBAR strives to inclusively serve the diverse needs of all the unaccompanied children detained in our region, which requires our staff to be trained and well-prepared to understand and adjust our services to each child. Our Shelter Services Department recently participated in a training on best practices to serve children with disabilities, learning about different types of disabilities and strategies they can use to create inclusive spaces where children feel comfortable and respected.

While at times invisible to the public understanding of migrant populations, unaccompanied children with disabilities have long undertaken the challenging journey to the United States in search of safety and opportunity. As they encounter our complex immigration system, their disabilities can create unique barriers to accessing the information and assistance they need to pursue their immigration cases.

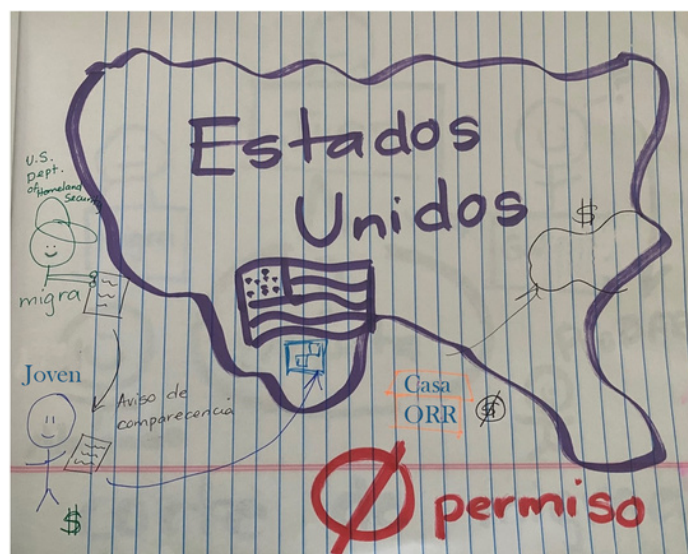
In the past several months, our staff noticed that more children who had a hearing impairment were being detained at one of the Office of Refugee and Resettlement (ORR) facilities where we provide services in the Rio Grande Valley. Recognizing the unique needs of these children, our team sought the assistance of sign language interpreters to facilitate services with the children, but communication was still challenging. Many of the children had not received inclusive and accessible education in their home country, or they did not know much formal sign language and communicated with their own personalized sign language. ProBAR's Unaccompanied Children Legal Services Specialists (UC Specialists) had to think of creative ways to provide them with Know Your Rights information and legal screenings, especially when interpreters were unsuccessful in facilitating communication.



Noting these challenges, our Shelter Services Department saw the need to equip UC Specialists with facts and tools so they may serve children with disabilities optimally. Two of the department's team members met and brainstormed about how to provide appropriate training to our staff. Sofia Delgado, Shelter Services Coordinator, has a background in mental health education, and Supervising UC Legal Services Specialist Karen Coronado Martinez completed a degree in Rehabilitation Services which developed her familiarity with services for the deaf population and participation in the deaf community. They were able to collaborate with one another to develop and present a training called "Advocating for Unaccompanied Children with Disabilities" to our staff.

The Advocating for Children with Disabilities training sought to build knowledge and offer strategies to adapt services for children with a range of disabilities. Staff learned about different disabilities, how to improve disability etiquette with the children, and about barriers the children encounter in the immigration process. For example, the training offered examples and provided videos of how neurodivergent children see and hear the world around them to help staff build understanding and consider how to best provide compassionate and effective services. Staff also learned ways to create spaces that feel comfortable for children with disabilities. For example, staff received guidance about directing the conversation to the child – even when an interpreter is facilitating communication, integrating visuals, and taking guidance from children prior to acting in ways staff perceives as useful. And even though speaking sign language is not a requirement for our UC Specialists, the training leaders encouraged staff to consider learning some basic signs to help hard-of-hearing children feel welcome.

This training was particularly valuable to our team considering their recent experiences serving children. UC Specialist Magnolia Cruz was eager to learn more and to improve her strategies and shared a story about her experience prior to the training providing services to a child who was hard of hearing. Magnolia learned that she was going to provide a Know Your Rights (KYR) presentation to a teenage boy who had a hearing impediment. As they began their session, she noted that although the child had just received some hearing aids at the shelter, the child's speech would become unclear as he became excited to share his story with her.

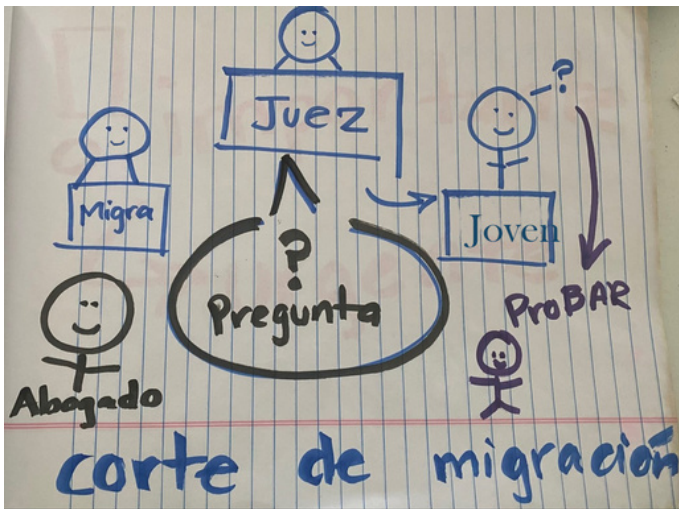




"After the training, I am much more aware of the different levels of disabilities and how to best create inclusive spaces for [children's] needs. Creating a space where children feel respected and comfortable is crucial in [legal] screenings."

Magnolia Cruz, UC Specialist

She quickly changed her method of providing the KYR from a typical oral presentation, replacing speech by drawing pictures and showing him graphics. Through these visual aids and by writing out short phrases, they were able to complete the KYR, and he was able to better understand the removal proceedings and court process ahead.



When asked how she identified the graphics as an alternate approach, Magnolia stated that her grandfather was hard of hearing, so she had some experience communicating with the deaf population. This previous experience notwithstanding, she stated that "After the training, I am much more aware of the different levels of disabilities and how to best create inclusive spaces for [children's] needs. Creating a space where children feel respected and comfortable is crucial in [legal] screenings."

Our Shelter Services Department was happy to receive the training and become better equipped to serve children with disabilities at ORR facilities. Serving diverse populations can be challenging, but ProBAR tackles this by educating our staff and providing them with tools to best serve children with a wide range of needs. As Supervising UC Specialist Karen Coronado Martinez said, "advocating for children with disabilities might seem scary at first, but I encourage you to give yourself the opportunity to grow and learn from them."



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