

A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

On the morning of April 25, I gathered my belongings and drove several miles down the road to begin a workday that was at once both momentous and mundane. After more than two years of remote work, our ProBAR team had reached our official "Return-to-Office" date and most of our staff would be returning to the office to work en masse for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic began. That morning, ProBAR's Director of Business Administration and I positioned ourselves outside the front door of the office with signs to greet ProBAR's team, including many staff members who had joined during the pandemic. Energy was high, and there was an immediate sense of connection.



ProBAR has always been about people: the individuals we serve and the team we build to support each other through highs and lows. And for most of my decade-long tenure at ProBAR, the connections we have built by coming together in person have underpinned our collective efforts. The COVID-19 pandemic, of course, forced us into a new mode of operations. Our direct services for immigrants, including children and adults in federal immigration custody, transitioned to a virtual setting. Children participated in Know Your Rights presentations over Zoom, and creative staff developed strategies to encourage children to engage in emotionally challenging legal screenings despite the disconnect imposed by a screen. Meanwhile, staff prepared packets and conducted individual legal orientations by phone to ensure that adults in ICE custody received information about their legal rights and responsibilities. Beyond these services, almost all of our engagement with clients, including asylum-seekers across the border, occurred virtually. From those earliest days, the entire team committed to the challenge of providing high quality legal services from an unfamiliar distance.

Since March 2020, our team has consistently done what was necessary to ensure that everyone we serve receives the information and assistance they need. As the pandemic wore on, needs arose that demanded a balance between caution and the practical benefits of in-person assistance. ProBAR's Clinical Team was called upon to support people crossing the border after securing exemptions from Title 42 expulsions – a rare occurrence – and they implemented safety protocols that allowed them to assist with transportation, lodging, and other services for clients in transition, all while prioritizing health. In early 2021, after the administration began to wind-down the Migrant Protection Protocols, ProBAR staff

voluntarily reported to work at the Brownsville bus station, welcoming asylum-seekers just processed into the United States and providing them with support as they prepared to journey onward to another destination in the United States. As the number of unaccompanied children arriving at the border rose dramatically in spring 2021, a new Emergency Intake Site managed by the Office of Refugee Resettlement opened in the Rio Grande Valley. ProBAR's Legal Department stepped up to this challenge, visiting the facility daily to offer in-person Know Your Rights presentations to the children detained there. And when the Migrant Protection Protocols were reinstated earlier this year, volunteers from our Legal Department again stepped up to provide legal orientations to asylum-seekers in-person at the tent court constructed at the port of entry in Brownsville. Meanwhile, essential staff from ProBAR's Business Administration department have worked diligently from our office throughout much of the pandemic to support smooth operations and to ensure functional facilities that allow each member of the team to complete their work.

By spring 2022, the ProBAR team had weathered waves of the pandemic, technological challenges, changing policy and practice at the border, and the evolving needs of our clients. The team's achievements were impressive, but we also recognized the need to bring people back together, back into connection with our clients and with each other in ways that are facilitated by sharing physical space. In April, our team undertook a transition back to in-person operations.

These efforts were layered. To support the team's return to office-based collaboration, our dedicated Facilities, Administration, Front Desk, and IT teams, undertook painstaking preparations. And these efforts facilitated a return-to-office that was smoother than expected.



At the same time, staff serving unaccompanied children navigated the complex process of returning to in-person services at the Office of Refugee Resettlement facilities where children are detained in the Rio Grande Valley. The details of where, when, and how services would be provided had to be planned in collaboration with facility staff, responding to the unique circumstances and operations of each facility. Nonetheless, the “why” of a return to in-person services was clear: connecting with children in-person transforms information from words spoken by an unknown speaker into resources from a trusted adult. It allows our team to build connections without the invisible barrier created by virtual services and platforms and to tap into body language and other non-verbal communication strategies without obstruction. More details of this transition to in-person services are shared in this quarter’s [Program Spotlight](#), and I encourage you to take a look to learn more about the process and the impact it has had for children.



I’m so proud of our team and all of the ways it has adapted over the last two years. As a leader, it has been exciting to welcome staff – long-tenured and new team members alike – to our office and to return to in-person services. The magnitude of the transition after two years of telecommuting should not be underestimated, but the experience of returning underscores the fact that people truly are the core of our work.

Thank you for forming part of ProBAR’s community of people committed to justice in the immigration system! While we may not be reconnecting with you in person, we appreciate opportunities like this newsletter to build our connection with you. We could not make our impact without your support.

Sincerely,

Kimi Jackson
ProBAR Director