

ProBAR's Shelter Services Team

returns to in-person services with an expanded toolkit that supports their commitment to empowering those they serve.

A Breath of Fresh Air

“Transitioning back to in-person services has been a breath of fresh air for both our team and work as a whole,” ProBAR Senior Shelter Services Coordinator Diana Molina shares. “Seeing each other and the children we work with has boosted morale and had many positive impacts.”

Across the nation, employees from many professions are in the midst of a transition back to working in-person, sharing physical space with coworkers and benefiting from opportunities to connect and collaborate in ways that virtual work made difficult.

Yet for ProBAR this transition has not been limited to a physical office. Rather, it has also brought with it the opportunity to work face-to-face with the children we serve, applying strategies gained during the pandemic and the power of in-person connections to engage children in learning about their rights and to build the trust that facilitates every legal service that follows.



Pictured: Shelter Services Staff

Friday, March 13, 2020, marked a turning point for the American Bar Association's South Texas Pro Bono Asylum Representation Project (ProBAR). Seemingly overnight, the COVID-19 pandemic threw us all into a world of unexpected challenges that shifted us off our usual courses. On this mid-March Friday, ProBAR staff were asked to take their work laptops and other important materials home in case they needed to shift into a temporary virtual situation. However, more than two years later, we are just now returning to our familiar, yet redesigned, in-person work experience.

During the pandemic, the ProBAR team was tasked with not only balancing their work and their personal lives, but also learning new ways to provide crucial legal services in an instantly remote environment. For ProBAR staff, this unique experience ended up strengthening our commitment to pursuing justice for all in the long run.



But in the moment, each of ProBAR's teams had to quickly adapt to the many unique challenges the pandemic threw their way, and our Shelter Services team was no exception.

Educators and Advocates

ProBAR's Shelter Services team plays an integral part in fulfilling ProBAR's mission to empower immigrants, providing legal services to more than twenty thousand unaccompanied migrant children in Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) custody each year. The department's staff includes Shelter Services Coordinators who serve as advocates by working with shelters to facilitate our services, ensuring that each child receives the services they need, elevating any concerns related to detention conditions, and developing relationships that support our team's ability to provide effective and responsive services.

Meanwhile, Unaccompanied Children Legal Services Specialists (UC Specialists) provide trauma-informed and child-friendly services including Know Your Rights Presentations that inform children about their rights and the immigration legal process. UC Specialists also perform legal screenings where they ask targeted questions to learn about a child's circumstances and potential eligibility for legal relief and permanent status in the United States. During these screenings, they must also gather and compile all relevant information and share it with an attorney who then reviews and builds a case.



Providing effective legal services is a team effort and one that demands special care and responsiveness to the needs of children. When reflecting on the Know Your Rights presentation and intake session experiences, UC Specialist Biridiana Ballesteros shares, “We must practice a lot of active and compassionate listening, as well as remain proactive in how we share information. We must take a child’s background and challenges they have faced into consideration.” While carrying out these duties, UC Specialists must create an engaging, trusting, and safe environment for the children they serve.

When the pandemic forced us to shift to providing legal services in a virtual environment, each aspect of our services had to be adjusted to accommodate these new circumstances. The Shelter Services team overcame many challenges that might have seemed unsurmountable at first in order to continue their work serving children.

Creating a Learning Environment Before the Pandemic

Amir Rivera is a Senior UC Specialist at ProBAR, meaning he conducts legal services for unaccompanied children and also trains and mentors his fellow team members. He describes his experience working with children in ORR facilities pre-pandemic. “Before the pandemic, our KYR presentations were all done by hand. We would draw on the whiteboard and fill it up with information. It was exhausting, but it was so special. You’re really creating something; you’re drawing pictures and giving specific examples. It is exciting and fun. I get to be loud and dynamic with these kids,” Amir shares. Conducting these presentations in the shelter was a way for our team to connect with the children face-to-face in a safe environment. UC Specialist Marco Martinez shares that in-person work also felt more “old-school” as information presented was organized in a classroom setting – rows of chairs, hand-raising, and team games were all part of the in-person experience.

Pre-pandemic coordination with ORR facilities was a complex, if familiar, operation. ProBAR's services for children occurred on-site at the facilities, which required Coordinators to serve as conduits for all sorts of information. They addressed daily matters such as available meeting space for UC Specialists to perform services, but they also exchanged information with facility staff about our needs as a legal service provider and the operations of the facilities in order to identify ways of working that would ensure that children received necessary legal services. Meanwhile, Coordinators also had to develop strategies to communicate with a team of UC Specialists that was nearly always on the move. But despite a range of challenges, most of these were familiar issues that the team had the training and experience to navigate in communication with the facilities.

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All the previous in-person systems used with children in ORR custody as well as with the facilities themselves had to be reimaged and altered to comply with public health standards. After being launched into completely uncharted territory, ProBAR's Shelter Services team learned new systems, software, and strategies to perform the work they had always done in a new light. "It was like when you were a kid, and someone threw you into the pool all of a sudden," says Amir. "But you never forget how to swim."

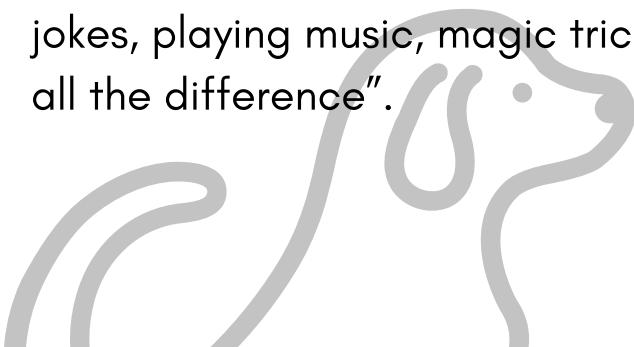
Navigating Uncharted Waters

“Many things about the conversations we were having changed,” says Noe Flores, a Shelter Services Coordinator. The experience for UC Specialists went from having face-to-face interactions to both staff and children looking at a screen, having difficult conversations and trying to make the best of it. Gone was the possibility of reading body language and non-verbal cues during sensitive conversations. With virtual services, human connection and warmth – a key part of securing the children’s trust and gathering crucial information about their stories – felt different. But then, a UC Specialist pressed play on their laptop and a guitar melody -- a familiar song or ballad -- started playing through the screen.

The child smiled and opened up almost immediately – their entire experience transformed. This is one of the strategies that the team used to create a space where the children felt safe and confident enough to tell their stories.



Marco also shares his favorite ice breaker during these Zoom meetings with children: showing off his dog on camera. Marco often made his pup the “Judge” character in his court role-play activity. “We’ve learned so many different tricks of the trade,” says Amir. “Things like telling jokes, playing music, magic tricks, and kid-friendly videos really made all the difference”.

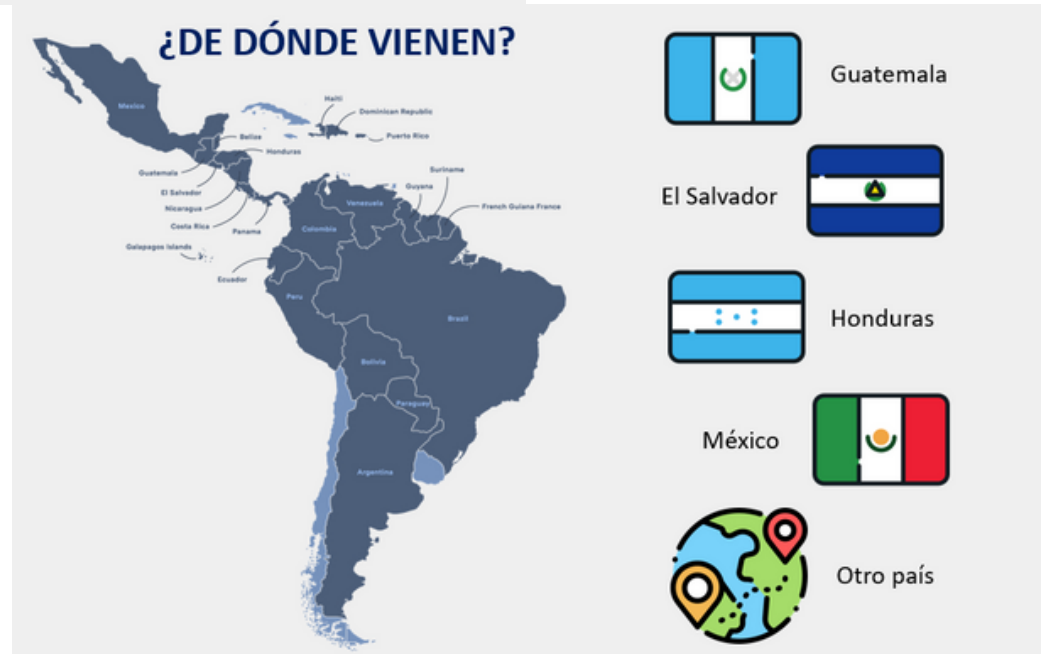


Biridiana tells us of the materials her team created to aid in this area - she spoke highly of a PDF file that contained images of things like stars, the Earth, and music symbols to get to know children and allow them to feel a bit more at ease. The team used this tool to ask questions like, "Stars are bright and beautiful - what are the 'stars' in your life? What's your favorite song?" Children spoke of family members, pets, and friends, and the anxiety they felt would minimize after having these conversations. The team also used PowerPoint presentations filled with imagery to help the kids understand the complexities of the immigration process.



Pictured: A slide from the KYR presentation used by the Shelter Services team. Shows the court process as a soccer game; one team being the children, another team being DHS, and the referee being the judge.

Pictured: A slide from the KYR presentation used by the Shelter Services team. Shows a map of Central and South America, as well as flags from the countries of origin of many of the children we serve.



Shelter Services Coordinators ran into their fair share of challenges during this time as well – many of them out of everyone’s control. At the start of the pandemic in particular, devices such as hotspots and laptops were in short supply at ORR facilities, which led to limitations on how many children could be served. Additionally, sometimes the facilities would run into issues with Wi-Fi or electricity, particularly during inclement weather. These outages occurred most frequently during rainy months and during Texas’ winter freeze in February 2021. Diana shares that despite these issues, her team was able to resolve them for the most part. The staff at the children’s detention centers were very helpful and accommodating and would do things like add extra routers or move children to different parts of the facility to ensure they got a chance to speak with us over Zoom.

Re-energized and Reconnected

The Shelter Services team did an excellent job addressing the challenges that arose during the pandemic. Still, they were eager to return to in-person services. Our ability to visit the ORR facilities to engage with the children has been rewarding in many ways for UC Specialists and Coordinators alike. And working with the children face-to-face, laughing at jokes together, and sharing a high-energy classroom has yielded positive results. UC Specialists can easily and quickly connect with their kids. “I find that they are able to trust me more and are just a lot happier having us in-person,” Amir says.

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The classroom comes to life when the team's enthusiasm and the newly animated KYR slideshow are combined. The children are excited to be engaged and seem to retain much more information when the Shelter Services team visits them in-person. They giggle, point to the pictures in the slideshow, and exchange silly faces with their friends. When a staff member asks the class a surprise question, they all raise their hands and chime in together. This positive learning environment is the result of the Shelter Services Team's deep understanding of the children's needs combined with the invigorating nature of an in-person environment.

Of course, none of these in-person services would be possible without the support and planning of ProBAR's Shelter Services Coordinators. Senior Shelter Services Coordinator Diana shares that many things within the children's detention centers have changed over the past couple of years. Two years is a long time, and during this period some facilities have expanded, while others shifted things around.



Coordinators had to work with each ORR facility to identify physical spaces within the facilities to conduct services, as well as navigate new protocols. Because staff are entering facilities' spaces to meet with children and provide services, the team's methods had to adapt to what was going on at each location. As an initial step, Shelter Services staff recently started touring facilities to learn of changes and new protocols for each ORR facility. Shelter Services Coordinators have also been continuously working to address children's needs and ensure appropriate accommodation for children with special needs or preferences, needs like learning disabilities and sensory issues, to name a few. Some examples include booking larger meeting spaces or planning for longer sessions with children. Aside from this, they have continued sending referrals to providers of specialized services, and training staff on new practices and techniques.

Stronger Together

After more than 2 years of virtual services the Shelter Services team returns to familiar scenes. Equipped with a new set of skills, the Shelter Services team members are unified and now stronger than ever. Morale has been boosted, and new team members are getting to know one another. Noe has relied on the relationship foundations he built with his colleagues that have blossomed since returning to in-person work, "I have been able to form great friendships here...building that awesome rapport with a lot of my coworkers and with my supervisors".

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Not only this, but there has been a sense of appreciation for the cross-departmental teamwork that took place during this pandemic time - Diana discussed the ABA Information Technology (IT) department's support in making sure her team had what they needed. ProBAR's friendly and helpful culture played a valuable role throughout the pandemic and beyond. "There is so much unity, support, help from everyone. They make you feel like you belong." says Noe.

Amir describes his experience at the office, "I'm so glad that we're transitioning back. It's great to see our building filled with people. I've been seeing old faces and new faces!". All in all, Shelter Services staff feel refreshed and appreciative of the new way of doing things. Those who were a part of the team prior to the pandemic feel as though they haven't skipped a beat, only now they are equipped with new knowledge and skills.

Marco joined ProBAR before the pandemic and is happy he has a chance to make children laugh and smile again in person. He shares a goal of his, "I want to make children feel better than when I first met them - I enjoy seeing them walk out with a brighter smile than the one they came in with."

Noe, who immigrated to the U.S. at 8 years old, deeply relates to the children he serves. "I can identify a lot with the kids...with being resilient and adapting to a whole new language, culture, different foods, a lot of different things". He describes himself as an advocate, working to give children a chance at new opportunities. "The kiddos see us as a refuge. We're here to give them a chance...sometimes there's a lot of crying, but then they smile through the tears." The work that the Shelter Services team does touches the lives of many.

Through it all, a shared sentiment shines quite brightly: the commitment to empowering our fellow humans. The team's commitment is remarkable, and they are ready to take advantage of their expanded toolkit with all the benefits of their return to in-person services.

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ProBAR's Outreach team is appreciative of all who took the time to speak with us for this piece and are in awe of the work they do and the passion they bring daily.