President's Column

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Midwest Human Rights Consortium Champions Unaccompanied Children from Around the World

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Midwest Human Rights Consortium Champions Unaccompanied Children from Around the World

BY MINAL GIRI, MD, FAAP; SRUTI UPPULURI, MD; AND MARY ELSNER, JD

The Midwest Human Rights Consortium (MHRC) is an interdisciplinary, multi-institutional program housed under the Refugee Immigrant Child Health Initiative of the Illinois Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics (ICAAP). Launched in 2019, MHRC is a formal referral hub for forensic evaluations which support the increasing legal needs of immigrant children and families navigating the U.S. immigration system. Last fiscal year, the U.S. government reported a continuing backlog of 1.1 million asylum-seekers who were awaiting adjudication of their claims inside the United States.¹ Forensic evaluations are psychological and medical assessments that can be used to support clients seeking various forms of immigration relief including asylum claims and other types of visas.

Since its inception, MHRC has spawned the development of a hospital-based clinic, an academic psychology training program, two student-run asylum clinics, and has fielded more than eighty requests for forensic evaluations from seventeen countries across four continents.

MHRC is a unique collaborative of medical and mental health providers and is co-chaired by ICAAP physician champion, Minal Giri, MD, FAAP, and Maria Ferrera, PhD, LCSW, associate professor of social work at DePaul University, co-chair of the Coalition on Immigrant Mental Health, and co-director of the Center for Community Health Equity. MHRC’s Steering Committee organizational participants are Ann and Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital, Chicago People’s Rights Collaborative, Children’s Legal Center, DePaul University, Kovler Center for Survivors of Torture, Loyola University Medical Center, National Immigrant Justice Center, Refugee One, University of Illinois at Chicago, and The Young Center. MHRC works closely with a panel of seasoned evaluators from various backgrounds, including psychologists, physicians, social workers, and other mental health professionals.

Training and Mentorship

Special training is required to perform forensic evaluations and document findings in the form of a legal affidavit. These affidavits serve as evidence and can greatly enhance asylum and other immigration claims. When medical and mental health providers are able to corroborate abuse through a forensic evaluation, applicants have a much greater chance of receiving asylum or other forms of legal relief. One study found that applicants who underwent a forensic exam were more than twice as likely to gain asylum.²

Pediatricians are well versed in observing and documenting signs of abuse and thus are well suited for performing these evaluations. To better meet the increasing demand for trauma-informed forensic evaluations, MHRC responded by offering training and mentoring to medical and mental health professionals. Gary Mart, MD, a volunteer evaluator and a child and adolescent psychiatrist said, “MHRC has taught me how to sharpen my interview skills, document my findings better, and better understand our immigration legal system. Performing evaluations through MHRC has been a mutually beneficial experience, allowing these individuals a better chance to start a new life free from persecution, and it has made me grow as both a psychiatrist and a human being.”

Forensic evaluations are time intensive and entail communication and coordination among the evaluator, lawyer, and client. In addition, learning to perform evaluations is a process and self-efficacy and competency are developed over time. MHRC
MHRC has centralized and refined a system for city-wide and regional referral coordination. Previously, there was no formal referral system in place to help lawyers connect with local evaluators. Lawyers mostly relied on informal channels to find professionals to perform evaluations. Additionally, not enough qualified evaluators were available to fulfill the requests. As a result, deserving asylum seekers and other claimants often went without evaluations that may have helped their cases.

According to Laura Hoover, JD, the executive director of the Children’s Legal Center, the work of MHRC and its volunteers fills a crucial role for victims seeking asylum. “While lawyers rely on psychological evaluations, there wasn’t always the expertise available to come in and do that. The work of MHRC and its volunteers has filled a crucial role.”

Referrals

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ADVOCACY

Policy-making
MHRC works collaboratively within the wider asylum medicine community to define best practices and evidence-based processes for conducting evaluations. On a national level, MHRC is represented at the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Immigrant Child and Family Health and assists in the creation of national policy statements and the establishment of asylum clinics throughout the country. Internationally, MHRC leadership was invited to contribute to an ongoing discussion on ethical concerns and standards at the Physicians for Human Rights’ Expert Consensus on Asylum Evaluation Round Table.

Pediatricians in the Midwest can get involved in assisting children who seek asylum through MHRC. For more information, contact Dr. Minal Giri at minalgirimd@gmail.com.

REFERENCES

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Despite limitations due to Covid-19 restrictions, MHRC has been able to fulfill more than 65% of its referral requests. In the last year, some mental health evaluators began conducting evaluations remotely via video conferencing. This has enhanced MHRC’s ability to expand its services to legal organizations outside the Chicagoland area. Currently, MHRC receives referrals from the National Immigrant Justice Center, the Children’s Legal Center, the Asylum & Immigration Law Clinic, DePaul University, Bluhm Legal Clinic Children & Family Justice Center, Northwestern University, and The Young Center for Immigrant Children’s Rights. MHRC has coordinated referrals for individuals from Bangladesh, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, El Salvador, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ghana, Guatemala, Guinea, Honduras, India, Mexico, Nigeria, Paraguay, Rwanda, Venezuela, and Vietnam.

“Through MHRC, the FAIR Clinic received its first and many ongoing referrals. We are extremely grateful to have the opportunity to be involved with such a knowledgeable and collaborative network of providers.”

– Rebecca Ford-Paz, PhD, Ann and Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital, FAIR Clinic