

Law Offices of
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Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
Building II, Suite 204
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Dear Dan:

Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) very much appreciates the opportunity to add a Columbia Law School graduate as an Equal Justice America Fellow to our team working at the South Texas Family Residential Center (STFRC), the largest detention facility in the country for asylum-seeking women and their children. The number of women and children being processed through this center by the federal government for possible deportation, the high-stakes consequences for each immigrant and her family, the eagerness of immigration officials to expedite the process, and the understanding by the immigrants and their jailers that what is called a “residential center” is, in fact, a prison all point to the necessity of our work inside the detention center and our continuing need for more skilled attorneys to take part in this work.

Texas RioGrande Legal Aid has been the lead agency in Dilley since December 2016, providing on-the-ground, day-to-day oversight of the Dilley Pro Bono Project (DPBP), which was spun off from a former collaboration known as the “CARA Pro Bono Project”. TRLA’s work is collaboration between the American Immigration Council, American Immigration Lawyers Association, and CLINIC, collectively known as the Dilley Pro Bono Project. The Dilley detention center is operated by private prison company CoreCivic and is set up to house more than 90 percent of the mother-child immigrants seeking political asylum in the U.S.

The families detained at the detention center are in expedited removal proceedings because they have been apprehended within 100 miles of the border or presented themselves at a port of entry. They face imminent deportation unless they can pass a Credible Fear Interview with an Asylum Officer by demonstrating that they have a significant or reasonable likelihood of prevailing in an asylum claim. By statute, asylum-seekers in expedited removal proceedings have very limited opportunities to appeal negative determinations. They are limited in that appeal to a hearing

before an immigration judge (in which the asylum-seeker can appear before the immigration judge but without the right to have counsel argue their case). DPBP engages in additional advocacy before the immigration court to challenge cases in which an asylum officer made a negative credible fear determination.

The delivery of legal services has been accomplished through teams of pro bono attorneys, legal assistants, and other volunteers who rotate through Dilley weekly, and the support of a small on-the-ground staff. The TRLA staff includes a Managing Attorney, two staff attorneys, and four paralegals. The American Immigration Council employs a Volunteer Coordinator, Advocacy Coordinator, and Project Manager. This staff is highly experienced in advocating for the families who are in expedited removal proceedings. Volunteers are trained and supervised by TRLA's legal team to help the detainees articulate the dangers they have experienced in their home countries and the imminent dangers they would face if they are returned home.

Since the end of 2014, more than 33,000 families have received limited-scope assistance. In the last two years, under TRLA's leadership and oversight, less than 1% of families were deported. TRLA's ability to continue to provide the needed high-quality, expert limited-scope and full representation is now completely overwhelmed in the aftermath of Attorney General Sessions's decision in *Matter of A-B-* (which narrows the basis under which those fleeing domestic violence and gang-based harm are eligible for asylum). Prior to the decision, the Asylum Office on average issued 1 to 2 negative decisions on a weekly basis out of approximately 300 to 400 weekly credible and reasonable fear determinations at Dilley. In the last several months, reunited families now housed at Dilley are being subjected to indefinite detention. At this point, only more attorneys and paralegals to meet the increased demand can reduce or eliminate the number of negative decisions. As immigration experts mobilize to respond to *Matter of A-B-*, a consensus is emerging that the decision has not and cannot eliminate fear-based asylum claims but that advocates will need to "prove up" claims more systematically--something that occurs already in full merits hearings. Now, more than ever before, we needed additional capacity in Dilley to ensure every family receives the legal assistance it deserves.

TRLA, therefore, is looking forward to adding the EJA Fellow to our staff to help stem the tide of deportations of immigrants who have every right to seek asylum in this country. As I'm sure you are aware, this work puts a great strain on our finances, but it is work to which we are wholly dedicated. Your support will be a big help in this ongoing work.

Attached please find a job description for the position, created with Shay Fluharty, TRLA's Dilley detention project director. Please contact me if you have any questions.

Best,



Robert W. Doggett
Executive Director