

More Than Good Intentions: Asylum Seekers' Need for High Quality Pro Bono Services



By Nicole Netkin-Collins

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How can I help? I began to ask this question when the plight of Syrian refugees filled the news outlets and my Facebook feed became littered with opinions about welcoming such individuals into our communities. As the granddaughter of Jewish immigrants who survived the Holocaust, I felt compelled to help in some way; but, before I could figure out how, a new assignment arrived on my desk. My son's daycare called, and a glance at my computer revealed several unread client e-mails. I was pulled back into the busy and privileged life of a young associate attorney with a family at a small, successful estate planning law firm. Time, it seemed, was not on my side as I considered what to do to help others new to this country.

Time constraints are not limited to new attorneys, however, and are never a reason for inaction. As a result, I approached Ellen Messali, an attorney who has committed her legal career to working on behalf of refugees at The International Institute of Connecticut (IICONN). IICONN is a nonprofit human services agency that provides linguistic, educational, social, and legal services to refugees and new immigrants in the State of Connecticut. IICONN also provides special services to victims of crimes such as human trafficking, torture, and domestic violence. Last year, IICONN provided legal services to 4,000 low-income clients from 92 different countries.¹ Such legal services were provided not only by Attorney Messali and her IICONN colleagues, but by a cadre of volunteer attorneys across the state.

Attorney Messali hopes to assist even more low income individuals seeking asylum and immigration services in the future, but notes the challenges in doing so. For example, when I expressed a willingness to take on a pro bono case, she kindly stated, "IICONN *really* needs more attorneys with immigration experience to not only handle pro bono or low bono cases, but to mentor inexperienced attorneys as they provide immigration services for the first time." As an attorney with experience in an entirely different practice area, I would be in a position of needing a dedicated and experienced mentor in order to provide the legal help that IICONN needs. Lack of experience, like lack of time, though, is never a reason for inaction.

There are several ways that I can support IICONN now. For example, every two weeks, IICONN hosts its Beauty School for Survivor Services for female clients. Beauty School offers women, who have suffered greatly, a chance to pamper themselves and to learn from motivational and educational speakers. The Beauty School is entirely supported by volunteers—from donations of make-up, nail polish, nail polish remover, cotton balls, and other beauty products to volunteer speakers on a wide range of topics, including using food stamps at local farmers' markets and how to conduct self-checks for breast cancer prevention. Volunteers can participate on a one off or ongoing basis. IICONN also has a mentoring program in which volunteers mentor a refugee or refugee family as they become self-sufficient in their new community. Mentors may help their mentees navigate the grocery store, attend school meetings or doctor's appointments, ride public transportation, or search for jobs and develop resume and interviewing skills. IICONN requires at least a three month commitment and requests that mentors meet with their mentees for a minimum of one hour per week.

Despite time and experience constraints, I still hope to utilize my legal skills to help immigrants and refugees. To that end, I hope that IICONN is inundated with offers from experienced immigration attorneys to not only handle new cases, but to mentor those of us with good intentions but no experience, and to partner with those of us with little time. Good intentions are just the start.

E-mail immigration@iiconn.org to learn more about providing immigration legal assistance through IICONN. To donate items or to volunteer, contact Luke Sharples at lsharples@iiconn.org or visit www.iiconn.org/volunteer. **CL**

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1. The International Institute of Connecticut, <http://iiconn.org/about/our-vision-and-mission/>