

Center for the Victims of Torture

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.startribune.com/torture-survivors-among-minnesota-s-most-vulnerable-during-pandemic/569509262/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Imagine you were trapped in an oppressively crowded dungeon where you were beaten repeatedly. Imagine you are a rape survivor whose friend died in your arms as you both fled your attackers. Or imagine you are a child who was snatched off the street and assaulted because your parent offended the ruling regime. After your escape, your will to survive and heal eventually leads you to a lifeline in the form of counseling, and your hope begins to rekindle. And then a pandemic hits, and that lifeline is threatened. Your world turns upside down once again.

This is not imaginary for tens of thousands of refugees and asylum-seekers today in Minnesota, and hundreds of thousands in the United States and around the world. This is their reality. COVID-19 has left no one untouched.

As Star Tribune reporter Maya Rao illustrated in a recent [article](#), the virus is destroying the family reunification dreams of some refugee families in Minnesota, as flights to the U.S. are canceled and reunions put on yet another, indefinite hold. The impact of such disruption on mental health and overall well-being is undeniable. For refugee and asylum-seeker survivors of torture and trauma like our clients at the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT), this pandemic has also robbed many of our Minnesota clients of in-person case management and counseling, two vital components of holistic healing.

COVID-19 and the resulting protocols and procedures for managing it have affected every single CVT healing center in the U.S. and overseas, which means our clients and their families are grappling with abrupt changes. Our healing centers in Minnesota and Georgia are closed to in-person counseling, but thanks to round-the-clock work and I mean that literally by our clinical staff, we are meeting many of our clients' needs through telehealth technology. However, there are hurdles. Some of our clients cannot access a digital connection with their CVT clinicians because they do not have the necessary technology. Some live in tiny apartments crowded with family members and so lack the privacy needed to meet virtually with their counselors. We are working hard to bridge these divides. In Amman, some of our CVT Jordan clients are connecting virtually with our clinicians, while also confronting increasingly distressing food shortages and the realities of isolation. And at our healing centers in Africa, where we would under normal circumstances hold 10-week counseling sessions, these sessions have been adapted so that our refugee clients completed their counseling cycle in an accelerated time frame.

While my colleagues and I have done our best to adapt to changing work environments and new models of care, our clients once again have led by example with their openness and willingness to explore new means of pursuing healing. Of course, they tell our clinicians, of course we can find a new way to meet. As many of us struggle to adapt to staying home, I am humbled by their resilience. Heartbreakingly, many of our clients are accustomed to isolation, to confinement. As is so often true, we are once again learning from our clients' experience.

We are still in early days, and we cannot know what is to come. Our clinical teams are adapting every day as circumstances warrant, for the sole purpose of continuing care for the individuals and families who have endured and escaped the horrors of torture and war. Like all of us, refugees and asylum-seekers deserve access to medical care and mental health support. They deserve access to safety within the borders of this country. The restrictions in place because of the pandemic don't change these fundamental truths, these fundamental human rights. It is our job at CVT to ensure that we exhaust every option in order to fulfill our mission to heal the wounds of torture. And it is our duty as human beings to recognize the humanity of our fellow men and women, including those who have sought safety and refuge not only in Minnesota but around the world.

Curt Goering is executive director of the Center for Victims of Torture.

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