

Center for the Victims of Torture

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

<https://www.cvt.org/blog/healing-and-human-rights/despite-hurdles-involving-stewart-detention-center-advocates-are> **Public Facing Advocacy Writing**

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I entered Lumpkin, Georgia, the town that hosts the infamous [Stewart Detention Center](#), and turned left on Main Street. Not knowing it then, within 30 seconds I had already passed the only restaurant in town, the entire downtown, [El Refugio](#) center, and the house of one of the few immigration attorneys living and working in Lumpkin. Three minutes later I was already at the detention center, a place working within a system separating families and depriving detainees of their due process rights. I expected to find a sullen town in the middle of nowhere; instead I found a tight-knit community of activists and lawyers doing their best in a challenging situation. The advocacy community was like a flower you are surprised to see grow out of concrete. Comedian Samantha Bee illustrates this perfectly in her Full Frontal episode, [Lumpkin or Leave It](#).

The Concrete

I would bet that when immigration attorneys hear a potential client is detained at the Stewart Detention Center, their first thought is this is a tough case, due to the location of the detention center and the incredibly low grant rates for immigration relief.

The closest hotels from Lumpkin are in Columbus, Georgia, and Eufala, Alabama, each of which is at least a 45- to 50-minute drive from the detention center. Since I stayed in Columbus, I drove for about an hour to reach the detention center, as I was there to help with the case of a torture survivor. Even when I arrived at the right time, I waited at least an hour before I saw him.



The Lumpkin immigration court has a large docket of bond hearings and appeals of negative findings of reasonable or credible fear interviews the first hurdle survivors must pass to be able to apply for asylum or relief under the Convention Against Torture. A win at Lumpkin's Georgia-Stewart Immigration Court is getting bond and successfully appealing a denial of a credible fear interview. Once individuals are released, they would likely transfer their case to a jurisdiction outside of Georgia, where the immigration relief grant rate is considerably higher. The grant rates in Lumpkin are among the lowest in the country, with all judges [denying at least 94 percent of asylum cases](#). It even has the [highest removal rate](#) in the country. At some detention centers, such as Stewart, asylum cases of detained individuals are scheduled much sooner than non-detained (from 2-4 months wait compared to 1-3 years). This means attorneys have little time to prepare the case, and thus must secure quick services from expert witnesses that can make the difference between winning or losing. While I was there, the detainee whose case I assisted needed to have a psychological evaluation. While it was incredibly hard to do, CVT was able to secure someone who could do an evaluation via Skype, a less-than-ideal scenario.

Families of detainees also face financial and physical obstacles that give rise to an unspoken type of family separation. To secure release of their loved one, families have to pay attorneys who charge higher fees because the client is detained in a place like Stewart. All of the extra hours spent trying to reach the client are billable. There are few pro-bono attorneys able to serve the detained population because it is difficult for nonprofits to get funding for the detained population, as these individuals are doubly demonized, by the Trump administration, for a minor criminal conviction for which they are likely to have completed their time. Furthermore, it's hard to secure funds to help clear one detained case, which would take up resources that could help 3 to 5 individuals who aren't detained.

In addition, most families live hundreds, or even thousands, of miles away from the detention center. Often the breadwinner is the one behind bars, and having to make the trip to visit loved ones further strains the pockets of families as they take time off work and spend money on hotels. Detention in the interior of the country is a very real form of family separation, [the effects of which are starting to reverberate in our communities](#).



The Flower

In response to the challenges facing detainees and their families, and because of the isolated location of Stewart, a wonderful community of activists emerged in Lumpkin. One of the first was a place called [El Refugio](#) the refuge in Spanish. Its an oasis for families who are plagued by constant sorrow as they swim against a very strong current. El Refugio eases stress by providing a free stay and food while families visit detainees. While I was in Lumpkin, an aunt had gone to watch the hearing of her nephew who was miraculously granted bond. As he was not going to be released until late the next day, she was able to stay at El Refugio, where she could prepare herself food and have access to the internet, clean towels and comfortable beds. During my time in Georgia, El Refugio had visitors every day and was completely full on one of the days.

I also worked with Marty Rosenbluth, an immigration attorney, and his team. He has a house that he uses as an office, the backyard of which hosts a double-wide trailer inhabited by attorneys from the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#). There are about six individuals who work together to help those at the detention center. The tight community of advocates makes up a large percentage of the small town. In a sense it felt as if the creation of the Stewart Detention Center had turned a dying town into a community of human rights defenders working towards a common goal: keeping families together and helping survivors of torture and other trauma.

So, what now? While detention continues to exist in remote locations, the next step is to help this community of advocates grow. This can be achieved with more awareness of the family separation taking place as a result of interior enforcement and promoting funding to nonprofits like El Refugio, who work within this context, pro-bono legal aid and organizations that provide mental health services to treat and evaluate asylum seekers and survivors of torture, such as CVT, who are committed to alleviating the kind of suffering many of these detainees have endured.

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