Asylum Agents Learn to Assess Tales of Torture

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Byline: By ERIC SCHMITT

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Body

In a sunny fourth-floor conference room at Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan, 10 of the Government's most experienced immigration officers who decide which refugees shall stay, and which shall be turned away, met last week over bagels and coffee to talk about ***torture***.

Aided by color slides, they discussed in gory detail electrocutions, beatings, burnings and other afflictions that leave visible scars. They also delved into suffocation, sleep deprivation, mock executions and other forms of psychological torment that leave no telltale marks.

Then came the hard part: figuring out how to listen to horror story after horror story from refugees, to decide who is lying and who is telling the truth and still remain sensitive to the plight of some of America's most vulnerable immigrants.

In an unusual pilot program, the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service has hired doctors, psychologists and even Broadway actors to teach its ***asylum*** officers how to better judge whether refugees are truly the victims of ***torture*** and deserve Government protection.

Officers also honed their interview skills to delicately divine the information they need without touching off an onslaught of traumatic memories for the refugee.

"This training will enable ***asylum*** officers to more easily identify people who are the victims of ***torture***, or trauma sufferers," said Wally Bird, an ***asylum*** supervisor in Lyndhurst, N.J., who completed the two-week course given by the Bellevue/New York University Program for Survivors of ***Torture*** and the Center for Victims of ***Torture***, in Minneapolis.

The new training comes at a pivotal time for the 300 members of the ***asylum*** corps, who are often the first contact that refugees have with the Government. More than 130,000 people applied for ***asylum*** last year, and experts say that 5 percent to 35 percent of them are survivors of ***torture***. The immigration service grants only about 20 percent of ***asylum*** requests.

Increasing the pressure on ***asylum*** officers to make the right call is a new law intended to swiftly weed out groundless ***asylum*** claims from refugees who arrive here with false papers or no documents at all.

The statute denies newly arriving ***asylum*** seekers full hearings with legal representation and the right to Federal appeals unless they quickly convince immigration officials that they have a "credible fear" of persecution in their native countries. Those found to have no "significant possibility" of winning ***asylum*** can be deported in nine days.

Before the law took effect on April 1, refugees without documents who sought ***asylum*** were allowed to stay while their cases were heard. If immigration judges ruled against them, the refugees could appeal to the Federal courts.

"The new law places additional responsibility on the ***asylum*** officers," said Eleanor Acer, coordinator of ***asylum*** programs for the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, an advocacy group. "They're now forced to make life-and-death decisions within a few days of someone's arrival in this country."

Other human rights advocates say that additional training cannot make up for a law that rushes some of the most vulnerable immigrants through a complex process without adequate legal safeguards. The result, these advocates say, is that some legitimate refugees may be sent back to the countries they fled.

"More sensitivity is better, but training and sensitivity can never compensate for a fundamentally flawed process," said Lucas Guttentag, director of the American Civil Liberties Union's immigrant rights project, which has filed suit to block the new law.

Top immigration service officials say they are mindful of their new powers. "We're being very cautious about how we exercise this authority," said Paul W. Virtue, the agency's executive associate commissioner for programs.

A three-week training course taken by all new ***asylum*** officers includes a lecture on identifying signs of ***torture*** in refugees. But the two-week pilot program, which ended on Thursday, was the most comprehensive training ***asylum*** officers have ever received on ***torture***. The immigration service said it would decide whether to expand the training to more officers after polling the participants of the pilot course.

Those officers are recommending the training to their colleagues, and with good reason.

Torture survivors are arriving with symptoms that are becoming more difficult to discern. "Tragically, torturers around the world are becoming increasingly sophisticated in the methods they use," said Dr. Allen S. Keller, an internist who heads the Bellevue-N.Y.U. program.

Many of the new techniques leave no physical scars and are indigenous to specific cultures. For example, human rights advocates say, the Chinese authorities take a mere vial of blood from imprisoned Tibetan monks and carelessly discard it, violating strict religious tenets that govern the disposal of bodily fluids.

"It depletes the Tibetans' spiritual energy and leaves them depressed," said Dr. David Eisenman, the Bellevue program's associate medical director, who has treated several Tibetans in Manhattan.

Asylum officers also heard about a West African diplomat who was locked for more than a year in a closet-sized room with racks of 500-watt light bulbs that were never turned off. The diplomat, who is seeking political ***asylum*** here, bore no physical scars, but suffered debilitating effects from a lack of sleep.

"There's a feeling that someone who's been ***tortured*** is going to have scars on his arms, is having nightmares and bursts into tears," Dr. Keller said. "It's not that simple."

The signs may be as subtle as a loss of hearing or inattentiveness.

In mock interviews with actors playing the roles of ***torture*** survivors, ***asylum*** officers ***learned*** that ***torture*** victims often do not tell their stories clearly and coherently.

Sitting in the Bellevue conference room on Thursday, Mr. Bird gently questioned Michelle Ingkavet, an actress playing the role of a 20-year-old Chinese woman whose profile was drawn from real cases. The mock interview went slowly, as Ms. Ingkavet fidgeted, dabbed at tears and barely whispered short replies to Mr. Bird's questions.

Every few minutes, specialists in the room gave Mr. Bird an on-the-spot critique: Slow down your questioning. Let her tell her own story. Watch for nonverbal cues. Build her trust.

In addition to sensitizing ***asylum*** officers, the pilot program sought to deal with the stress officers experience listening to refugees' histories.

The concern is so widespread that the San Francisco ***asylum*** office has hired counselors to help its 25 officers manage stress. Ultimately, the move could benefit ***asylum*** seekers.

"If you hear too many of these stories, you're liable to become numb and unresponsive," Dr. Eisenman said. "And if that happens, the officers may not believe them."

Graphic

Photo: Is she a ***torture*** victim or a fraud? Michelle Ingkavet, an actress, took part in a training session for ***asylum*** officers on Thursday in Manhattan. Wally Bird, a supervisory officer, questioned her under experts' guidance. (Librado Romero/The New York Times)(pg. 36)

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